



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Report on the Committee Stage of the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

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Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Education is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No. 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department of Education and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant delegated legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Education.

Membership

The Committee has nine members including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Nick Mathison MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Danny Baker MLA
- Mr David Brooks MLA^{1, 2}

¹ With effect from 1 July 2025, Mr David Brooks replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

² With effect from 9 June 2025, Ms Cheryl Brownlee replaced Mr David Brooks

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- Mr Jon Burrows MLA^{3,4}
- Mrs Michelle Guy MLA⁵
- Ms Cara Hunter MLA
- Mrs Cathy Mason MLA
- Mrs Julie Middleton MLA^{6,7,8,9}

³ With effect from 8 September 2025, Mr Jon Burrows replaced Mr Colin Crawford

⁴ With effect from 7 October 2024, Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr Robbie Butler

⁵ With effect from 9 September 2024, Mrs Michelle Guy replaced Ms Kate Nicholl

⁶ With effect from 5 May 2026, Mrs Julie Middleton replaced Mr Peter Martin

⁷ With effect from 2 March 2026, Mr Peter Martin replaced Mr Gary Middleton

⁸ With effect from 23 September 2025, Mr Gary Middleton replaced Mr Peter Martin

⁹ With effect from 16 September 2024, Mr Peter Martin replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

CfC	Committee for Communities
CFNI	Community Foundation NI
CiNI	Children in Northern Ireland
CRM	Convention Rights Memorandum
DE	Department of Education
DfC	Department for Communities
EA	Education Authority
EFM	Explanatory and Financial Memorandum
ESR	Examiner of Statutory Rules
FSM	Free school meals
HAF	Holiday Activities and Food programme
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
RaISe	Research and Information Services
RCN	Rural Community Network
SHFG Scheme	School Holiday Food Grant Scheme
The 1986 Order	The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986
UK	United Kingdom

UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WPG	Women's Policy Group NI
WRC & UU	Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster University

Executive Summary

1. The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill was introduced in the Assembly by Mr Danny Baker MLA (the Bill Sponsor) on 3 March 2026. The Bill contains four clauses and seeks to amend the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 to address holiday hunger by providing permanent direct payments to the parents of eligible children and young people during school holiday periods in place of free school meals (FSMs).
2. As introduced, the Bill places duties on the Education Authority (EA) and the Department of Education to make direct payments to the parents of pupils who would otherwise have received FSMs during holiday periods.
3. Following the Second Stage debate in the Assembly on 13 April 2026, the Bill was referred to the Committee for Education for scrutiny at Committee Stage. The Committee issued a call for evidence and received views from a range of stakeholders through written submissions and oral evidence sessions.
4. The Committee heard evidence from the Department of Education, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), and the Youth Assembly. It also took oral evidence from the Bill Sponsor and received legal advice from Assembly Legal Services to support its scrutiny.
5. A number of key themes emerged from the evidence including child poverty and need, the impact of holiday hunger, issues relating to targeting and eligibility and the proposed delivery mechanism. These matters are examined in detail in this Report.
6. The Convention Rights Memorandum (CRM) concludes that none of the Bill's provisions raises any human rights concerns requiring detailed scrutiny. It notes that the EA and the Department are already required to act compatibly with Convention rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. The CRM further concludes that the Bill does not engage Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework and does not require additional examination by the Committee.

7. The Department of Education has identified a number of potential amendments, which the Committee has agreed to take forward. The Committee has also commissioned an amendment to clarify the Assembly procedures that would apply to subordinate legislation made under Clause 4(4). Clause 4(4) enables the Department to make supplementary provision by order to support implementation, including addressing practical or transitional matters. The Committee's amendment is intended to ensure that the appropriate scrutiny procedure is clearly specified.

8. David Brooks MLA and Julie Middleton MLA advised the Committee that in principle they are not in favour of the Bill. However, they decided not to divide the Committee on individual decisions but to request this statement of their position in the report.

Introduction

Background to the Bill

9. The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill was introduced to the Assembly by Mr Danny Baker MLA (the Bill Sponsor) on 3 March 2026. The Bill contains four clauses and seeks to amend the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 by providing permanent financial support, through direct payments, to the parents of eligible children and young people during school holiday periods in place of FSMs.
10. As introduced, the Bill places a legal duty on the EA to provide a payment in lieu of school meals, milk or other refreshments for pupils who would normally attend school during the defined relevant periods.
11. Eligibility is limited to parents of children who qualify for FSMs, determined in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department.
12. The Bill sets the value of the payment at the equivalent cost of school meals or refreshments that non-FSM entitled families would normally pay, unless the Department specifies a different amount through regulations. It also gives the Department powers to make regulations to set the payment amount and amend the definition of relevant periods.
13. An Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken. The Bill takes as its starting point the Department's existing policy parameters for free school meal eligibility. Engagement between the Bill Sponsor and the Equality Commission did not identify any initial equality implications arising from the proposals. The Bill Sponsor indicated that engagement on equality issues will continue and does not consider that the Bill will adversely affect any of the groups specified under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Committee's Approach

14. The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill was introduced in the Assembly on 3 March 2026. It completed Second Stage on 13 April 2026, with Committee Stage commencing immediately thereafter. On 22 April 2026, the Committee agreed a motion to extend the Committee Stage. The Assembly subsequently agreed the extension to 18 September 2026 on 12 May 2026.
15. The Committee took oral evidence from the Bill sponsor on 15 April 2026.
16. The Committee considered the Bill alongside the accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM).
17. A public call for evidence was issued on 20 April 2026 via the Citizen Space survey platform and closed on 15 June 2026. A total of 19 responses were received, comprising 11 from individuals and eight from organisations. In addition to publishing notices in the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News* and *News Letter*, the Committee wrote to key stakeholders to invite submissions. Written responses from those who consented to publication are included at Appendix 5.
18. During the period covered by this report, the Committee considered the Bill and related issues at ten meetings. Minutes of Proceedings are included at Appendix 1.
19. The Committee took oral evidence from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) on 29 April 2026, the Department of Education on 6 May and 3 June 2026, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) on 27 May 2026, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) on 17 June 2026 and the Youth Assembly on 24 June 2026.
20. The Committee sought evidence from a range of stakeholders, including Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust and Advice NI. However, after initially agreeing scheduling and mindful of the available time frame, these stakeholders decided to contribute by written submissions instead.
21. In line with normal practice, the Committee invited the Bill Sponsor to respond to issues raised during the evidence-gathering process.

22. The Committee considered a Convention Memorandum from the Northern Ireland Assembly Legal Services (27 May 2026), giving written information on the interaction between the Bill and the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework.
23. The Committee also considered advice from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) on 3 June 2026 regarding the Bill's regulation-making powers. The Examiner concluded that the delegation of legislative powers in the Bill is not inappropriate.
24. The Bill as introduced contains four delegations of legislative power. Based on the advice provided, the Committee is satisfied that the exercise of this power is subject to an appropriate level of Assembly scrutiny, except in relation to the powers conferred by clause 4(4) of the Bill.
25. The Committee undertook its formal Clause-by-Clause scrutiny of the Bill on 1 July 2026. At the same meeting, the Committee considered a draft of its report on the Committee Stage and ordered that the report be published. This completes the Committee's formal consideration of the Bill at Committee Stage.
26. Supporting documentation is provided in the Appendices: Minutes of Proceedings (Appendix 1), Minutes of Evidence (Appendix 2), memoranda and correspondence from the Bill Sponsor (Appendix 3), submissions from the Department of Education (Appendix 4), written evidence (Appendix 5), other relevant papers (Appendix 6), and RalSe papers (Appendix 7).

Overview of the Bill

27. The Bill, as drafted, contains four clauses and no schedules. Its Long Title states that it makes “provision for direct payments to be made during school holidays to pupils entitled to receive free school meals; and for connected purposes”. The accompanying EFM describes the provisions as follows:
28. *Clause 1: Modification of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.* Clause 1 inserts new Articles 58(1A) to 58(1H) into the 1986 Order, creating a recurring duty on the EA to provide a financial payment in lieu of school meals, milk or other refreshments during the defined relevant periods for parents of pupils who receive FSMs, under arrangements approved by the Department. Payments will be made to a nominated bank account. The EA is required to keep accurate records of all payments and share them with the Department, and the payment amount will match the published cost of school meals. The clause also gives the Department regulation-making powers to set the payment amount and amend the definition of the relevant periods, and requires the Authority to publish current school meal charges on its website.
29. *Clause 2: Consequential amendments.* This Clause sets out consequential amendments, including definitions for “the relevant periods” and “the model Disposal of Records Schedule”.
30. *Clause 3: Interpretation.* Clause 3 covers interpretation and clarifies that references to “the 1986 Order” in the Bill are to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.
31. *Clause 4: Short title and commencement.* This Clause sets out the Short Title and commencement provisions. The main provisions of the Bill must be brought into effect by the Department no later than the next relevant period following Royal Assent.

Key issues from the Evidence

32. A number of key themes and issues emerged from the written and oral evidence considered by the Committee.
33. The Bill Sponsor's 14-week consultation (12 November 2024 – 18 February 2025) received over 1,100 responses. Respondents expressed strong support for measures to address holiday hunger, with more than 96% of respondents agreeing that improved food security during school holidays would enhance children's educational outcomes and almost 99% recognising associated physical and mental-health benefits.
34. There was similarly strong agreement that extending FSM support would help alleviate financial pressures on low-income families, with a clear majority supporting legislation to provide entitlement, or payments in lieu, during holiday periods.
35. Most respondents favoured direct financial support, particularly weekly payments made to bank accounts, although a minority preferred vouchers or direct meal provision.
36. The Committee took evidence from the Youth Assembly, informed by an engagement session with 27 Youth Assembly Members. The session included an overview of the Bill from the Bill Sponsor and discussion of both its practical operation and wider policy context.
37. Youth Assembly Members demonstrated strong awareness of holiday hunger and its impact on children and young people in Northern Ireland, and 90% of them indicated support for the Bill.
38. The Committee's own call for evidence received 19 responses via Citizen Space and 17 written submissions.
39. A clear majority of respondents supported the Bill's overall policy objectives. Most also considered the proposed provisions likely to be effective, and stakeholder organisations broadly endorsed the Bill's aim of easing financial pressures on low-income families and addressing holiday hunger.

40. A minority of respondents questioned the Bill's effectiveness or approach. Issues included the potential diversion of resources from other priorities, whether support would be sufficiently targeted and risks associated with direct cash payments, including potential misuse. Some respondents expressed uncertainty but raised similar considerations.
41. Respondents also identified potential unintended consequences, including increased pressure on school budgets, perceptions of inequity linked to eligibility thresholds and concerns about nutritional outcomes if payments were not used as intended. Operational challenges were highlighted, such as administrative or digital barriers, variability in delivery and the need to ensure payment levels remain adequate over time. Broader concerns highlighted that the policy may not fully address the needs of low-income working families or reduce pressure on community organisations without addressing wider costs associated with school holidays.

Child poverty and need

42. In evidence to the Committee on 15 April 2026, the Bill Sponsor, Mr Danny Baker MLA, described the Bill as a targeted anti-poverty intervention aimed at approximately 90,000 children in Northern Ireland who are entitled to FSMs. He emphasised that the Bill represents one element of a wider strategy to address child poverty rather than a standalone solution.
43. Evidence indicated that food insecurity remains a significant issue. In 2023–24, 11% of households in Northern Ireland experienced food insecurity, with households containing children more likely to report both low and very low food security.
44. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation told the Committee that the risk of poverty is not evenly distributed across society. Children experience a disproportionately high burden, with 24 per cent affected overall. It notes that this headline figure masks significantly higher rates among particular household types. Child poverty affects 40 per cent of lone-parent families, 33 per cent of families with three or more children, and 27 per cent of families with a child aged under five. These patterns illustrate the unequal distribution of poverty risk across different family circumstances and the heightened vulnerability of certain groups.

45. Unison highlighted evidence from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2026) indicating that 14 per cent of the population lived in relative poverty before housing costs and 16 per cent lived in absolute poverty. For children, the figures were similarly stark: in 2025 an estimated 67,000 children were living in relative poverty and 15 per cent were living in absolute poverty.
46. Dr Sinéad Furey and Professor Jayne Woodside highlighted opportunities to reduce inequalities through the extension of FSM eligibility, including consideration of universal provision. They cited academic evidence suggesting that universal or expanded FSM schemes can address interconnected challenges such as child poverty, food insecurity, health and nutrition inequalities, educational disadvantage, stigma and social exclusion, and economic efficiency.
47. The Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University (WRC & UU) together with the Women's Policy Group NI (WPG) expressed similar support for the Bill but stressed that it should form part of a wider package of anti-poverty measures required to address child poverty and socio-economic-driven educational disadvantage in Northern Ireland. They argued that this wider approach should include the introduction of universal FSMs for all pupils.
48. Evidence presented by Dr Furey and Professor Woodside also outlined the physical health implications of food insecurity, ranging from short-term hunger to longer-term risks of malnutrition. Population-level data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (2019–2023) show that fruit and vegetable consumption falls below recommended levels across all age groups, with only 4% of children aged 11–18 meeting the 5-a-day recommendation. Children in this age group also have the highest mean intake of sugary drinks, confectionery, fried foods and meat products. Across all age groups, recommended limits for saturated fat and free sugars are exceeded, while fibre intake remains below government guidance.
49. The Community Foundation NI (CFNI) emphasised that holiday hunger is linked not only to food access but also to poverty, social isolation and overall well-being. It noted that holistic models that combine nutritious food with opportunities for physical activity, social interaction and wider support, deliver

stronger and more sustainable outcomes. CFNI suggested that the Committee may wish to recognise the value of integrated provision and encourage exploration of complementary mechanisms that address broader family needs.

50. In his written submission and the EFM, the Bill sponsor referenced findings from the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on child poverty, which highlights the persistent educational attainment gap between children in receipt of FSMs and their peers.
51. The report indicates that disparities emerge early in childhood and continue throughout the education system. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds can fall significantly behind in cognitive development by the time they enter primary school and pupils entitled to FSMs are more likely to experience poorer educational outcomes, including a higher likelihood of leaving school without achieving GCSE qualifications.
52. The Bill Sponsor attributed the cessation of the previous School Holiday Food Grant (SHFG) Scheme in March 2023 to its lack of a statutory basis. He noted that no replacement scheme has been introduced and suggested that its withdrawal contributed to rising food bank usage.
53. The Committee was advised that the SHFG Scheme, funded by the Executive Office and administered by the Department of Education, provided £27 per child per fortnight for children entitled to FSMs. The scheme operated from July 2020 to April 2023 at an estimated annual cost of £20 million. RalSe confirmed that no equivalent government-funded programme has been introduced since its closure.
54. In 2023–24, the Trussell Trust distributed more than 90,300 emergency food parcels across Northern Ireland. As highlighted by the Bill Sponsor in the EFM, 60,831 parcels (74%) were provided to families with children, representing a record level of need. These figures do not include parcels distributed by non-Trussell food banks. Trussell Trust data for 2024 further illustrated the scale of inequality, showing that one in every eight people referred to a food bank lived in a household with three or more children.

55. RalSe also reported a wider trend of rising food insecurity, with emergency food parcel distribution increasing by 143% between 2018 and 2024, the largest increase recorded in any part of the UK.

Impact of Holiday Hunger

56. Research indicates that food insecurity is associated with adverse effects on children's physical health, mental well-being and educational outcomes. RalSe advised that children experiencing hunger during school holidays may return to school tired, less able to concentrate and at increased risk of learning loss.
57. Advice NI noted that the provision of FSMs reflects a government-level recognition of the need to provide meals during term-time. However, FSMs are only available on the 190 days children attend school, despite their nutritional needs remaining constant throughout the year. It advised that the absence of provision during school holidays places additional and cumulative pressure on family budgets and contributes to holiday hunger.
58. Evidence highlighted that the additional cost of feeding children who would otherwise receive FSMs coincides with other seasonal expenses including childcare, holiday schemes and activities and the cost of school uniforms and footwear, resulting in increased financial pressure on families.
59. As a result, it is understood families adopt a range of coping strategies including parents skipping meals or reducing their own intake, purchasing cheaper and less nutritious food and cutting all discretionary spending, which can lead to social isolation for children. Some families take on debt to manage these pressures, while others avoid seeking support due to stigma, suggesting that the full extent of need may be under-reported. The cumulative impact places significant mental and emotional strain on parents and affects overall family well-being.
60. Youth Assembly Members demonstrated a strong awareness of holiday hunger and its impact on children and young people across Northern Ireland. Many referred to personal experiences or observations of food insecurity and emphasised that access to food remains a basic need throughout school holiday periods. Members highlighted the additional financial pressures faced

by families during holidays and generally viewed current arrangements as insufficient.

61. RalSe advised that, although evaluations of the impact of holiday food provision are limited, available evidence suggests positive impacts. The UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger found that children attending holiday food and activity programmes had improved diets, increased physical activity, better behaviour and returned to school in an improved condition.

Comparative Approaches elsewhere

62. The Committee noted evidence from CiNI that Northern Ireland is falling behind other jurisdictions in both the scale of support provided to children experiencing poverty and the ambition of policy responses to holiday hunger. CiNI highlighted that Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK without a government-funded holiday food and activities programme and the only jurisdiction across the UK and the Republic of Ireland without any form of universal FSM provision.
63. CiNI and the WRC & UU outlined a range of measures implemented elsewhere to address child poverty and food insecurity. They noted that England provides universal FSMs for pre-school, P1 and P2 pupils; Scotland entitles all children up to P5 to a universal meal, with further eligibility linked to the Scottish Child Payment; and Wales provides universal FSMs for all primary pupils, with plans to extend entitlement for secondary pupils in households receiving Universal Credit. They argued that universal provision throughout the school year offers families greater financial stability and resilience to unexpected costs, including during the summer months.
64. The Committee further noted that, during school holidays, the UK Government funds the Holiday Activities and Food programme in England, while Scotland provides a similar scheme for children entitled to FSMs and offers direct holiday meal payments to eligible families, typically around £2.50 per child per day.
65. Stakeholders also referenced recent developments in the Republic of Ireland, where an evaluation of the school meals programme recommended the establishment of a Universal School Meals Programme, aligned with the EU

Child Guarantee. Since 2025, the Republic of Ireland has introduced a free hot meal for every primary school pupil.

66. CiNI expressed concern at the widening disparity in support for children in Northern Ireland compared with other jurisdictions and emphasised the need for a strengthened policy response.
67. The Bill Sponsor advised that, following extended school holiday periods, some children who return to school malnourished fall significantly behind their peers. Concerns were raised that inadequate nutrition limits children's ability to engage in education and achieve their potential.
68. CiNI emphasised that addressing holiday hunger should be viewed as a preventative investment, highlighting the benefits of access to food and activities for children's well-being, confidence, health and social development. It also noted the limitations of relying on charitable and community responses to address what it described as a structural issue linked to poverty.
69. CiNI referenced its 2023 youth advisory group research, which surveyed over 200 young people across Northern Ireland. Nearly half reported concern about their family's ability to afford essentials. One in five reported experienced hunger more often, while one in seven had skipped meals due to a lack of money. Almost one in five said hunger or concerns about food affected their ability to concentrate in school.
70. Evidence suggests that the impacts of holiday hunger are most acute during the summer break, when the absence of school-based support can contribute to poorer educational outcomes and disengagement from learning.
71. The Bill Sponsor highlighted wider social impacts of holiday poverty, noting that school holiday periods may coincide with increased levels of antisocial behaviour and community tensions, underlining the need for greater support and positive opportunities for children and young people.

Targeting and Eligibility

72. The Bill Sponsor advised that FSM eligibility provides the most practical basis for delivering holiday payments, as the Department of Education already holds the relevant data and considers it a consistent indicator of need.
73. The Department explained that the current FSM income threshold for Universal Credit households, set at £14,000 for 2017–2024, was introduced to support the transition from legacy benefits and to maintain existing levels of entitlement. This threshold followed a public consultation and an equality screening exercise.
74. Evidence highlighted limitations in using FSM eligibility as a proxy for poverty. RalSe referred to Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency analysis showing that fewer than one-third of children living in poverty receive FSMs, and noted that eligibility depends on an application process rather than automatic enrolment.
75. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation notes that nearly two thirds (64%) of children living in poverty are in households where at least one adult is in work.
76. The Committee for Communities (CfC) also drew attention to concerns raised during the Second Stage debate regarding families on the “working poor” threshold who would not benefit from the Bill despite being vulnerable to food insecurity.
77. Unison also highlighted research by Bunting *et al.* (2024)¹⁰ showing a significant gap between poverty levels and eligibility for free school meals. Between 2017 and 2020, 41 per cent of families living in poverty did not qualify for FSM entitlement. The study further criticised the current eligibility criteria, noting that they disadvantage working families in poverty, who are less likely to meet the threshold despite experiencing comparable levels of need. This evidence underscores ongoing concerns about the adequacy and targeting of FSM policy in Northern Ireland.

¹⁰ Bunting, L., Gleghorne, N., Maguire, A., McKenna, S., & O'Reilly, D. (2024) 'Changing trends in child welfare inequalities in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Social Work*, 54(5), 1809–1829.

78. The Committee was advised that the latest Consumer Council NI Household Expenditure Tracker¹¹ shows that the lowest-income households now spend 24.1% of all basic expenditure on food, the highest level recorded since monitoring began. Evidence indicated that households in this income group, whose resources derive from low wages and/or benefits, are particularly vulnerable to unexpected price rises, unforeseen expenses and the wider impacts of the rising cost of living. Stakeholders noted that this situation is expected to worsen, further increasing financial pressure on already constrained households.
79. The Committee considered correspondence from Advice NI, which welcomed ongoing efforts to improve FSM administration, including work on eligibility verification and continued engagement between the Departments of Education and Communities.
80. RalSe advised that approximately 90,000 pupils (26%) are entitled to FSMs, with an uptake rate of around 81%. Stigma was identified as a barrier to uptake, including reports of bullying linked to FSM status. It was suggested that a more discreet holiday payment mechanism could improve reach among eligible families.
81. Evidence presented to the Committee highlighted a persistent gap between the number of children living in poverty and those eligible for FSMs, which stakeholders characterised as a broader policy issue extending beyond the immediate scope of the Bill. CiNI emphasised the scale of this disparity, while NICCYP similarly raised concerns and recommended that the Department review FSM eligibility criteria. In particular, NICCYP proposed removing the requirement for receipt of means-tested benefits and instead adopting a net income threshold aligned with the poverty line and adjusted to reflect family size.
82. This issue was reinforced in evidence from Nourishing NI, which noted that limitations in current eligibility thresholds are a consistent theme across community and voluntary sector experience. While acknowledging that the Bill is appropriately focused on those currently entitled to FSM, stakeholders

¹¹ Consumer Council NI, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker, Quarter 4 2025 (October December 2025) [Q4 2025 Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker | Consumer Council](#)

suggested that this should be regarded as a baseline level of support, with the wider question of FSM eligibility thresholds warranting further policy consideration.

83. NICCY further recommended legislative provision to enable data-sharing of income and benefits information, alongside exploring automatic enrolment mechanisms to ensure FSM support reaches all children experiencing poverty.
84. CiNI also noted that the Department's equality and human rights impact assessment of ending the SHFG Scheme found that its removal would disproportionately affect children from Black and minority ethnic communities, Traveller communities and disabled children, who are over-represented among those eligible for FSMs.

Delivery mechanism

85. On 3 June 2026, Departmental officials advised the Committee on Clause 1, which inserts new paragraphs after Article 58(1)(b) of the 1986 Order.
86. In relation to proposed new paragraph 1A, NICCY noted that the provision aligns with the overall intent of the Bill and supports the Executive's obligations under Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) reinforcing the duty to assist low-income parents in providing adequate food for their children.
87. The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) welcomed the Bill's cash-first approach, citing expert evidence from the Independent Food Aid Network that cash-first crisis payments promote dignity and autonomy, enabling families to meet their needs efficiently and flexibly.
88. Respondents to the Committee's call for evidence similarly supported a cash-first model, highlighting its potential to reduce stigma, provide flexibility and enable efficient delivery through existing FSM systems. Evidence suggested that direct payments allow families to meet essential needs in a dignified and responsive way.
89. A number of stakeholders highlighted the benefits of a cash-first approach, noting that alternative mechanisms such as vouchers or pre-selected food

provision can restrict choice and may not meet the dietary needs of all households, including those with health-related, cultural or religious requirements. Evidence from Unison and NIWBG notes that this approach allows for any dietary preferences and restrictions, whether arising from allergies, health conditions, disabilities or religious obligations.

90. NIWBG submitted that households managing conditions such as coeliac disease, face significantly higher food costs: for example, households maintaining a gluten-free diet have a weekly food shop that is around 35% more expensive, the cheapest gluten-free bread is over six times the price of standard bread and eight in ten people report difficulty affording gluten-free products, with those in poverty most affected.
91. Stakeholders argued that cash-first initiatives offer families the flexibility to purchase appropriate foods, support autonomy and dignity, and help ensure that children can access a healthy diet that meets their individual needs.
92. Unison further noted that this approach will minimise food wastage when compared with the direct provision of meals, which offers less scope for choice and individual preferences.
93. Nourishing NI challenged any implication that direct financial support is inappropriate, arguing that such a view risks suggesting that parents experiencing poverty cannot be trusted to manage resources for their children. Drawing on testimony from its network, it emphasised that families often budget with precision and avoid food banks to preserve dignity. It argued that a statutory entitlement payment would recognise and support this responsible behaviour.
94. The Department identified that the phrase “a financial payment” implies a single payment per holiday period. It noted that the previous SHFG Scheme made multiple payments during the summer, and the current drafting would restrict payments to a single lump sum.
95. Officials also raised concern that the use of the phrase “in lieu of” may have unintended legal consequences. As it means “in place of”, officials suggested it could prevent a pupil who has received a holiday payment from being entitled to

- a FSM if they return to school earlier than anticipated. Officials provided an example in which a payment covering 1 July to 31 August could be interpreted as precluding entitlement to a FSM on 31 August if the pupil returns that day.
96. Reflecting earlier evidence that approximately 41% of children in poverty are not eligible for FSMs, NICCY observed that proposed new paragraph 1B would empower the Department to amend FSM eligibility criteria. NICCY suggested that Holiday Food Payments could therefore be directed to those meeting revised criteria, enabling more accurate targeting.
 97. CFNI recommended supplementing payments with practical advice on healthy choices and cost-effective meal preparation. Feedback from previous CFNI-funded schemes indicated that combining food with activities led to combined improvements in diet, health and emotional well-being.
 98. New Article 58(1D) provides that the financial payment is to be equivalent to the cost of milk, meals or other refreshment paid by parents not eligible for FSMs, subject to any exercise of the power in Article 58(1F).
 99. The Department explained that the wording “milk, meals or other refreshment” mirrors the 1986 Order, but does not accurately reflect current FSM provision which does not include milk or refreshments, as fresh drinking water is freely available.
 100. Officials further noted that the phrase “would normally be in attendance” is ambiguous. They stated that it is unclear how it would apply to pupils such as school refusers, long-term ill pupils or those on study leave, creating uncertainty about entitlement.
 101. It is understood that the cost of a school meal varies by school type. From January 2026, the EFM states that meals cost £3.00 in nursery schools, £3.10 in primary and special schools, and £3.34 in post-primary schools.
 102. The Committee heard that post-primary canteen provision includes a wide range of individually priced items. For example, a meal of the day (£2.60) combined with a dessert (£0.74) totals £3.34, aligning with the FSM allowance. However, pupils are not required to purchase a standardised meal and may select alternative combinations at different price points.

103. NICCY highlighted that the per-meal cost set out in the EFM is subsidised and does not reflect the full cost of producing a school meal. The EA reported this cost to be £4.28 for 2024–25. NICCY argued that any payment made in lieu of FSMs should align with the full cost of preparing a school meal.
104. Unison argued that Holiday Meal Payments should be based on evidence of the actual cost of providing a healthy lunch within the home. They referred to the Northern Ireland Healthy Food Basket research, commissioned by the Food Standards Agency, Safefood and the Consumer Council, which estimates that a minimum essential healthy food basket costs between £151 and £276 per week for households with children, depending on family composition. This evidence highlights the importance of aligning payment levels with the real cost of meeting nutritional needs in low-income households.
105. The WRC & UU emphasised the relationship between food affordability and government dietary guidance. Evidence indicated that healthier foods cost more than twice as much per calorie as less healthy options, with the price gap widening by 27% between 2015 and 2025. Research by the Food Foundation suggests that households with children in the lowest income quintile would need to spend around 85% of disposable income to meet the Eatwell Guide standards.
106. In supplementary evidence, Dr Sinéad Furey highlighted Department of Health statistics showing a clear socio-economic gradient in child health outcomes. In 2024/25, obesity rates among Primary 1 pupils in the most deprived areas were 73% higher than in the least deprived, rising to 87% among Year 8 pupils. Oral health outcomes showed similar disparities, with dental extraction rates more than double in the most deprived areas.
107. While the Bill provides for a single price for meals for all paying post-primary pupils, evidence indicated that this does not reflect current practice. The Committee heard that a clearly defined and consistent price point would be required to underpin calculation of a holiday meal payment.
108. New Article 58(1F) enables the Department, by regulations, to determine the amount of the financial payment payable under Article 58(1A), within the framework set out in Article 58(1D).

109. Under Article 134(2) of the 1986 Order, regulations made under Article 58(1F) are subject to the negative resolution procedure.
110. Consistent with the Minister of Education's Second Stage statement, the Department advised that no standard cost exists for a post-primary school meal because pupils select and pay for individual items. As such, it is not possible within the Bill, as introduced, to identify a single amount for the EA to pay to families.
111. Officials reiterated that the Bill's reference to "milk, meals or other refreshment" does not align with current FSM provision, which does not include a drink. This creates a misalignment with existing arrangements.
112. Officials further advised that the Bill, as drafted, would be administratively impractical, as it would not be feasible to calculate or track individual child spending on different items. In contrast, the previous SHFG Scheme applied a standard allowance. The Department indicated that an amendment would be required to make the Bill workable.

Relevant Periods

113. New Article 58(1A) of the 1986 Order provides that payments are to be made during "the relevant periods". Clause 2(1) of the Bill amends Article 2(2) to insert a definition of that term.
114. The "relevant periods" are defined as the Summer, Halloween, Christmas, mid-term and Easter school holiday periods, including the summer holiday at the end of a pupil's final school year, but excluding bank holidays and any other school closures.
115. The Committee's call for evidence showed strong support for Clause 2, with most respondents agreeing with the proposed definition. However, some stakeholders recommended broadening the definition to include all school closure days, such as staff development days and bank holidays, and ensuring flexibility to extend support during emergency closures.
116. Respondents also emphasised the importance of clear and accessible guidance to support consistent application of the provision. They highlighted the need for

regular review of definitions and associated processes to ensure they remain effective and compliant with legal and data-protection requirements.

117. Dr Sinéad Furey and Professor Jayne Woodside sought clarity on the phrase “... and any other school closure”. They, along with CFNI, suggested including provisions enabling direct cash transfers during unforeseen disruptions, such as a recurrence of a pandemic.
118. The WPG, WRC & UU expressed support for extending payments to cover exceptional closures, bank holidays and other periods when schools are closed.
119. The Bill Sponsor clarified that the intention is for the relevant periods to be limited to those specified in Clause 2. It was noted that extending provision to additional periods, such as single-day school closures due to extreme weather or staff training days, was considered likely to increase administrative complexity and resource demands.
120. New Article 58(1G) confers a power on the Department to amend, by regulations, the definition of “the relevant periods”, thereby enabling amendment of the 1986 Order. Regulations made under Article 58(1G) are subject to the negative resolution procedure.

The Department identified the timing of school holiday periods as an area of concern, noting that schools have discretion in setting their holiday schedules. Start dates may therefore vary between schools and, in some cases, between year groups within the same school. Officials advised that, while standardised dates were applied under the SHFG Scheme, it would be unworkable for the EA to tailor payments to individual school holiday arrangements.

Administrative feasibility

121. NICCY identified three broad delivery options for providing holiday support: direct payments to parents, vouchers restricting eligible purchases, and the direct provision of food, such as through food banks or Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programmes.
122. NICCY expressed a clear preference for direct payments, arguing that such an approach respects parental dignity and recognises parents’ central role in

meeting their children's needs and avoids the implication that families cannot be trusted to manage resources. Direct payments were also identified as the most cost-effective and efficient delivery mechanism.

123. NICCY further emphasised the accessibility and flexibility of direct payments, enabling parents to meet children's needs in line with individual circumstances, including dietary requirements. CiNI similarly highlighted that direct payments can reach families at scale while promoting dignity, choice and flexibility, contrasting this with the more restrictive nature of voucher-based schemes.
124. In relation to the proposed drafting of new paragraph 1C, the Department advised that restricting payment solely to a nominated bank account would exclude individuals without access to such an account. It is understood that under the previous SHFG Scheme, the EA issued cheques to a small number of recipients. The Committee was told the proposed drafting would remove this alternative payment option.
125. Departmental officials noted that experience from the SHFG Scheme demonstrates the need for flexibility in payment methods. For example, the EA may issue cheques to those without bank accounts or make payments to ASPEN cards for asylum seekers. Officials advised that retaining flexibility is essential to ensure equitable access to support.

Welfare Benefits

126. The Department of Education advised that it has not engaged with the Department for Communities (DfC) on the treatment of holiday meal payments for welfare benefit assessments and has no plans to do so.
127. DfC confirmed that Universal Credit is the principal means-tested benefit for families in Northern Ireland and that payments made under the Bill would not be treated as income when calculating entitlement.
128. DfC further confirmed that payments made under the Bill would not be treated as income for the purposes of legacy benefits, including Housing Benefit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, and State Pension Credit.

129. DfC also advised that the proposed payment would not affect eligibility for Carer's Allowance or Discretionary Support.
130. The Committee notes that, although responsibility for the FSM scheme rests with the Department of Education, DfC officials have previously worked with the Department to develop guidance for claimants on uploading Universal Credit statements to the Department's online portal to support FSM eligibility assessments.
131. DfC further advised that its Universal Credit service continues to liaise with the Department of Education to verify award amounts for applicants who are unable to use the online portal, enabling FSM eligibility to be confirmed through alternative means.

Social supermarkets

132. During Committee discussions, Members, including Jon Burrows MLA and Peter Martin MLA raised the potential for vouchers, food-provision schemes, or links to social supermarkets, raising questions around value for money and ensuring support reaches children effectively.
133. RaISe evidence highlighted that stigma could act as a barrier to accessing FSMs and suggested that direct payments could offer a more discreet form of support, potentially increasing uptake among eligible families.
134. The Committee was advised that the Social Supermarket Programme is funded through the Executive's Welfare Mitigations package, approved until March 2028 and allocated £2.86 million in 2025/26.
135. DfC informed the Committee that funding is distributed to councils using a population- and deprivation-based formula. Councils are responsible for commissioning local provision. Following co-design processes in each of the eleven council areas, a range of delivery models now operate, reflecting differences in Voluntary and Community Sector capacity, rural and urban contexts, and the commissioning approaches adopted by individual councils.
136. Social supermarkets are not a statutory service. It is understood individual projects set their own access criteria based on identified local need. DfC told

the Committee that most operate time-limited membership models and can support only a fixed number of members at any one time. As a result, agencies working with people experiencing food insecurity typically signpost individuals to local provision rather than using a formal referral system.

137. Although children and young people may benefit indirectly from the programme, they cannot access it independently due to the requirement to engage with wrap-around support aimed at maximising household income and improving food security.
138. DfC further advised that while some households in receipt of FSMs are likely to be using the service, it does not hold personal data that would allow this to be confirmed or to target specific cohorts.

Financial implications

139. The Department of Education advised that the previous SHFG Scheme was funded through additional ring-fenced Executive allocations and did not require the diversion of departmental resources from other priorities.
140. Officials noted that the Bill does not specify a funding mechanism and that, if enacted, costs would need to be met from the Department's existing budget on an ongoing basis.
141. The Department of Finance indicated it would be content for the Department of Education to ring-fence funding within its existing Resource DEL allocation to support such payments.
142. If additional funding were required, the Minister of Education would need to bring proposals to the Executive as part of the Budget process, with any request subject to Executive agreement.
143. Evidence presented to the Committee emphasised both the immediate and long-term costs associated with food poverty and gaps in support. The WPG highlighted that addressing food poverty should be viewed as an investment. It referenced Northern Ireland Audit Office estimates that child poverty costs between £825 million and £1 billion annually. It warned that failure to act risks exacerbating health inequalities and widening attainment gaps.

144. Nourishing NI highlighted the consequences of inaction, citing evidence from community food projects showing increased reliance on foodbanks, rising household debt, and heightened stress and anxiety among affected families. This evidence highlights both the immediate social impacts and the longer-term economic implications of inadequate provision.
145. NICCY noted that a recent Assembly Question¹² sought details on Barnett consequential funding received in relation to the Holiday Activities and Food Programme. The response confirmed that consequential funding had been received, though the amount was not specified. NICCY understands this funding is likely to be in the region of £6–£8 million. While not ring-fenced, NICCY advised that these additional resources could be allocated to support the programme.
146. RaISe highlighted that the Bill is being considered in the context of significant budgetary pressures, including an estimated £800 million deficit in the Department's 2026–27 draft Budget. The EFM estimates an average annual cost of approximately £21.9 million, subject to variation depending on pupil numbers, uptake rates and the cost of school meals.
147. The EFM estimates assume 70 school holiday days per year and include administrative costs of approximately £40,000 per year over nine years. RaISe estimates that the total projected cost of the Bill over the period 2025/26 to 2033/34 would be approximately £196 million, assuming full uptake. Based on current uptake levels of around 80.9%, this could reduce to approximately £176 million, equating to an average annual cost of around £21.8 million at full uptake and £17.6 million at current uptake levels.
148. Departmental officials advised that these estimates may understate the true cost. They noted that payments covering the period from 1 July to 31 August would typically involve 74 or 75 days, rather than the 70 days used in the EFM calculations.
149. Officials further stated that costs are directly linked to the price of school meals, which has been rising. The EA has indicated that the cost of producing a meal

¹² AQW 44253/22-27

exceeds the price charged, with production costs increasing at an average rate of 7.2% a year since 2016–17.

150. Additional departmental analysis suggests a higher number of eligible pupils than assumed in the EFM, with projections indicating that more than 82,000 children could be entitled to FSMs by 2033–34, compared with fewer than 80,000 in the EFM.
151. Taking these factors together, officials projected higher overall costs, estimating expenditure of £20.8 million in 2026–27, rising to £31.5 million by 2033–34. They advised that these figures are significantly above those set out in the EFM and should be taken into account when assessing the Bill's financial implications.

Cross-departmental coordination

152. RaISe noted that the Bill relates to several existing Executive strategies and policy objectives. It highlighted that the Programme for Government (2024–2027) includes commitments to reduce poverty and inequalities and to improve outcomes for children. The Bill also aligns with the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy (2025–2035), which identifies children as disproportionately affected by poverty and emphasises coordinated Executive action to address socio-economic disadvantage. In addition, the Children and Young People's Strategy (2020–2030) recognises the impact of social disadvantage on educational attainment and includes commitments to tackle educational disadvantage and support children most in need through cross-departmental working. RaISe concluded that the Bill is broadly consistent with the Executive's stated policy priorities.
153. The Committee for Communities welcomed the Bill's alignment with the strategic direction set by the Anti-Poverty Strategy and confirmed that food security during school holiday periods remains a matter of clear and continuing interest in its scrutiny of the Strategy's development.
154. The Expert Advisory Panel on the Anti-Poverty Strategy highlighted the need to remove financial barriers to educational participation. It recommended making school participation cost-free to reduce family expenditure, including through

extending FSM provision to school holidays, increasing funding for breakfast and homework clubs and expanding Sure Start provision.

155. The Committee notes concerns that the published draft Anti-Poverty Strategy departs from earlier proposals, particularly in moving away from a lifecycle approach and reducing its focus on child poverty. Notwithstanding this, NICCY emphasised that the Bill represents a tangible measure through which the Executive can take practical action to meet its obligations to address child poverty within the Strategy's framework.
156. The CfC also observed that policy interest in the Bill spans the responsibilities of the Department for Communities (anti-poverty policy and welfare benefits), the Department of Education (education provision and FSM administration) and the Department of Health (paediatric and public health considerations relating to child nutrition). It noted, as did CiNI, that this cross-cutting landscape is precisely the type of policy environment the Children's Services Co-operation (Northern Ireland) Act 2015 was designed to support.
157. The Committee explored whether responsibility for addressing holiday hunger should rest solely with the Department of Education or be addressed through a broader Executive-wide approach. Some Members questioned whether the issue would be more appropriately addressed through cross-departmental action, given its links to poverty, welfare and wider social policy.
158. The Bill Sponsor acknowledged that other Departments have a role to play in tackling child poverty but argued that the Department of Education represents the most practical and effective delivery mechanism for the proposed scheme. He noted that the Bill builds on existing FSM entitlement arrangements, that the Department already holds the relevant eligibility data and that holiday hunger has a direct impact on educational outcomes, including pupil well-being, attendance, engagement and attainment.
159. In his written submission, Kevin Higgins (Advice NI) recognised that concerns remain regarding the mechanism for delivery, specifically whether this responsibility should sit with the Department of Education.

160. He reflected that during the COVID-19 period, when the priority was to provide urgent support to families and children, the Department of Education successfully delivered SHFG payments. He advised that a Departmental Notice in 2020 stated that this approach was “*appropriate and proportionate*” to ensure compliance with Article 58(1) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which establishes the statutory duty to provide meals and related support for eligible pupils.
161. It is understood that Ministerial statements supported the approach, emphasising both the principle of access to nutritious food and the need to assist low-income families in this way.
162. It was suggested that this establishes a clear and consistent policy and operational precedent, endorsed by the Executive, the Assembly, successive Education Ministers and the Department of Education. It was further submitted that transferring responsibility to another department could introduce legal and operational risks, whereas delivery through the Department of Education aligns with established statutory functions, systems, and practice.
163. The Department’s Equality and Human Rights Policy Screening confirms that the scheme was developed and delivered by the Department of Education, with payments administered by the Education Authority using existing systems linked to FSM eligibility.
164. It also confirms that the scheme provides targeted support to low-income families and notes that its discontinuation could increase financial pressures and reliance on alternative supports, such as food banks.
165. The Committee noted the view that implementation of the Bill should not preclude wider Executive collaboration or consideration of additional measures to address child poverty.

Equality and safeguarding concerns

166. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets minimum standards for children’s rights across protection, health, education and welfare. It is understood a child-rights approach reframes poverty by recognising

children as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of charity and places obligations on governments to meet these minimum standards.

167. NICCY identified Article 27 as particularly relevant, as it recognises every child's right to an adequate standard of living. While primary responsibility rests with parents or caregivers, the Article places a clear duty on the state to provide material assistance and support where required. This includes access to adequate nutrition, clothing and housing, which are identified as priority areas for government intervention.
168. NICCY emphasised that the Executive has a responsibility under Article 27 to assist parents in need to provide for the material needs of children, particularly in relation to food.
169. The WPG, WRC & Ulster University highlighted the gendered nature of food poverty, noting that women are disproportionately affected due to their greater likelihood of living on low incomes, relying on social security, working in low-paid or insecure employment and undertaking unpaid caring responsibilities. Evidence indicates that women often act as "shock absorbers" within households, managing limited budgets and, in some cases, going without food to ensure that children and other family members are provided for. They concluded that food poverty is not gender neutral, with women frequently bearing a disproportionate share of financial hardship, often to the detriment of their own health and well-being.
170. The Bill Sponsor told the Committee that any arrangements for providing support during school holidays should protect the dignity and privacy of recipients and avoid creating circumstances in which children or families feel singled out. While alternative mechanisms such as vouchers or digital systems were discussed, concerns were raised that these could introduce additional barriers for some families. The Bill Sponsor emphasised the importance of ensuring that support is delivered in a manner that is accessible, inclusive and free from stigma.
171. The Bill Sponsor was asked to consider the merits of a phased implementation. It was suggested that an initial rollout to a smaller cohort could allow assessment of effectiveness, value for money and outcomes before wider

implementation. However, Mr Baker MLA reasoned that the proposed target group of children entitled to FSMs already represents a minimum level of support and that existing evidence from previous holiday food support schemes demonstrates a clear need for intervention.

172. The Committee was also advised that any future scheme should include mechanisms for ongoing review and evaluation, including consideration of its contribution to wider objectives such as reducing educational disadvantage.

Rural poverty

173. A number of stakeholders including CFNI and the Rural Community Network (RCN) emphasised that the provision of equal payments may, in practice, produce unequal outcomes, particularly for families experiencing rural isolation. RCN advocated for a place-based approach, recognising that experiences of poverty vary across communities and that effective interventions should be responsive to local circumstances.
174. Food security has also been a recurring theme in the Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs Committee's recent work, particularly in relation to rising fuel and fertiliser costs and their knock-on impact on food prices. These pressures have been felt most acutely in rural areas, where higher transport and production costs compound existing vulnerabilities within the food supply and affordability landscape.
175. It is understood that approximately 37% of the Northern Ireland population lives rurally. Stakeholders stressed the need for equitable support that recognises the distinct access barriers faced by rural households, rather than assuming that uniform levels of assistance will meet differing levels of need.
176. Dr Sinéad Furey and Professor Jayne Woodside advised that Northern Ireland's dispersed population contributes to higher fuel and transport costs for consumers, increasing the risk of poverty and social exclusion compared with urban households. In this context, collaborative efforts to reduce poverty, health inequalities, and food, fuel, financial and transport poverty, as well as wider social exclusion, are particularly welcome.

177. RCN urged the Committee to seek assurance that the Department has undertaken appropriate Rural Needs screening and, where necessary, a Rural Needs Impact Assessment in relation to the implementation of the Bill.
178. The Committee noted the need for a collaborative, cross-departmental approach. Some Members suggested that issues relating to rural poverty may be more appropriately addressed through welfare provision. The Committee recognised this may extend beyond the remit of the Department of Education and agreed not to pursue an amendment on this matter at this stage.

Record Keeping

179. The Committee also considered proposed new paragraph (1E) relating to the keeping of records. Departmental officials advised that a comprehensive legislative framework already governs the retention and disposal of records by public bodies in Northern Ireland. They noted that restating these requirements in the Bill would not reflect best drafting practice, as the obligations are already established in law.

Convention Rights Memorandum

180. The CRM concludes that none of the Bill's provisions raises any human rights concerns requiring detailed scrutiny. It explains that the Bill places duties on the EA and the Department of Education, both of which are already required to act in line with Convention rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. It further finds that the Bill does not engage Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework and does not require particular concern or further examination by the Committee.

Unintended consequences

181. Stakeholders cautioned that the Bill may give rise to several unintended consequences. They highlighted potential pressures on the Department's budget, noting that without Executive-level agreement to provide ring-fenced funding, implementation could displace other priority initiatives despite holiday hunger being a cross-departmental poverty issue. Concerns were also raised about cliff-edge effects for families just above the FSM threshold, including potential hardship, upward pressure on school meal charges and the lack of recognition of seasonal income fluctuations. Respondents further questioned

payment adequacy, as linking support to centrally set school meal rates may not keep pace with real-terms food-cost inflation. Finally, they warned that reduced investment in community provision could undermine holistic programmes that deliver wider outcomes beyond direct financial support.

Commencement

182. The Committee considered evidence regarding the timing of Royal Assent and the commencement of the Bill's provisions. It was noted that, although the Bill could be passed by the Assembly before dissolution for an election, Royal Assent typically takes around one month. In such circumstances, the issue may not arise. However, concerns were raised that, if Royal Assent were granted shortly before the start of a holiday period, the practicalities of making and laying a Commencement Order in advance of the next relevant holiday period could be challenging.

183. The Committee heard that one possible approach would be for the Bill to come into operation automatically on Royal Assent, with commencement provisions addressed subsequently, thereby avoiding potential operational difficulties. It was also noted that including a Commencement Order may not add value if earlier implementation is feasible, although this approach could introduce administrative complexity, including the possibility of retrospective payments.

184. Clause 4(4) enables the Department to make additional provision by order to support implementation of the legislation. This includes addressing practical or transitional matters that may arise.

185. The Committee notes that the Bill does not specify that the exercise of this delegated power is subject to any Assembly procedure. Where such powers are used to amend primary legislation, this should be explicitly stated in the Bill and subject to a higher level of Assembly scrutiny, such as the draft affirmative procedure. For more routine provisions that do not amend primary legislation, a lower level of scrutiny, such as the negative resolution procedure, may be appropriate.

Proposed amendments

186. The Bill Sponsor indicated that a number of technical, or "tidying-up", amendments would be required and expressed a preference for progressing this work either independently or through the Committee. The Bill Sponsor subsequently engaged directly with the Bill Office to develop the necessary amendments.
187. During its deliberations, the Committee agreed to take the required amendments forward.
188. Committee Members David Brooks MLA, Jon Burrows MLA and Julie Middleton MLA indicated that, although they would not seek to divide the Committee, they do not support the principles of the Bill. They noted that this position is without prejudice to any decisions they might take during the subsequent stages of the legislative process.
189. The Department of Education identified a number of potential issues with the drafting of the Bill as introduced. The Department confirmed that the Minister has no current plans to bring forward amendments to the Bill.
190. As outlined earlier in this report, Clause 4(4) enables the Department to make supplementary provision by order to support the implementation of the legislation, including addressing practical or transitional issues.
191. The Committee agreed to commission an amendment to clarify the Assembly procedures applicable to subordinate legislation made under these powers.
192. The table overleaf sets out the amendments considered by the Committee.

Clause	Relevant Bill text	Potential drafting issue	Origin of issue	Commissioned amendment
<p>1(1A)</p>	<p><i>the Authority shall...during the relevant periods provide a financial payment in lieu of milk, meals or other refreshment to the parent of a pupil</i></p>	<p>The phrase 'a financial payment' implies a single payment per holiday period. The previous SHFG Scheme made multiple payments during the summer, and this drafting would restrict payments to a single lump sum.</p>	<p>DE</p>	<p>1. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 5</p> <p>Leave out 'a financial payment' and insert 'financial payments'</p>
				<p>2. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 11</p> <p>Leave out 'payment' and insert 'payments'</p>
				<p>3. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 14</p> <p>Leave out 'payment' and insert 'payments'</p>
				<p>4. Clause 1, Page 2, Line 6</p>

				Leave out 'payment' and insert 'payments'
1(1A)	<i>the parent of a pupil who would normally be in attendance at a school</i>	The phrase 'would normally be in attendance' is potentially ambiguous. It is unclear how this might apply to cohorts of pupils such as school refusers, pupils who are long-term ill, or those on study leave. These pupils may or may not be considered to 'normally' attend, creating uncertainty about entitlement.	DE	5. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 6 Leave out 'who would normally be in attendance at school'.
1(1B)			DE	6. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 9 At end insert— '(1BA) Without prejudice to the generality of Article 58(1A), where a pupil is attending school on a day within any relevant period, that pupil shall be entitled to both the free school meal and the financial payment detailed in (1A).'
1(1C)	<i>make the financial payment to an eligible parent under Article 58(1B) by means of a</i>	Restricting payment solely to a nominated bank account excludes those who may not hold a bank account. Under the previous	DE	7. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 13 At end insert—

	<i>payment to a bank account nominated by that parent</i>	SHFG Scheme, the Education Authority (EA) issued cheques to a small number of recipients. This drafting would prevent such an alternative payment method.		‘(1CA) If an eligible parent does not have access to a bank account, the Authority shall, in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department, make the financial payments by an alternative method.’
1(1D)	<i>The financial payment shall be equivalent to the cost of milk, meals or other refreshment a category of parent not eligible under Article 58(1B) would pay in respect of a pupil during school attendance times as published by the Authority from time to time, subject to any exercise of the power in (1F).</i>	At post-primary level there is no single fixed cost, as pupils choose food items at different price points. The 'cost' paid by a non-FSM parent is therefore variable and not a defined figure. Whilst the Bill Proposer has indicated that he would be content that the post-primary payment value would be the equivalent of the EA's daily meal allowance to FSM pupils (currently £3.34), this is not stated on the face of the Bill.	DE	8. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 14 Leave out from the second ‘the’ to the end of line 18 and insert— ‘a daily allowance specified by the Authority, in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department.’
1(1H)	<i>The Authority shall publish on the website of the Authority the current school meal charges payable under Article 58(1D).”</i>		DE	9. Clause 1, Page 2, Line 10 Leave out from ‘current’ to ‘payable’ and insert ‘daily allowance specified’.
2(1)	<i>“the relevant periods” means the Summer, Halloween, Christmas, mid-term and Easter, school holiday periods, (including</i>	To allow flexibility for different holiday periods.	DE	10. Clause 2, Page 2, Line 16

	<p><i>the summer holiday at the end of a pupil's final year at school), but does not include bank holidays and any other school closure;"</i></p>		<p>Leave out from "the Summer" to the end of line 19 and insert—</p> <p>'(a) Summer holidays (all weekdays in July and August);</p> <p>(b) Halloween (five weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A));</p> <p>(c) Christmas (ten weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A));</p> <p>(d) February mid-term (five weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A)); and</p> <p>(e) Easter (ten weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A)).'</p>
<p>1(1B)</p>	<p><i>The category of parents to whom Article 58(1A) applies is those persons whose children are in receipt of free school meals</i></p>	<p>Making the language consistent as drafted.</p>	<p>ESR</p> <p>11. Clause 1, Page 1, Line 7</p> <p>Leave out from "The category" to "children" on line 8 and insert— 'Article 58(1A) applies to parents of pupils who'</p>

<p>3</p>	<p><i>In this Act—</i> <i>“the 1986 Order” means the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.</i></p>	<p>Definition of “relevant period” for the purpose of <i>this</i> Bill.</p>	<p>ESR</p>	<p>12. Clause 3, Page 2, Line 24 214. At end insert— “relevant period” has the meaning given in Article 2(2) of the 1986 Order.’</p>
<p>4(4)</p>	<p><i>operation of any provision of this Act.</i></p>	<p>To clarify the Assembly procedures applicable to subordinate legislation made under these powers.</p>	<p>ESR</p>	<p>13. Clause 4, Page 2, Line 35 At end insert— ‘(5) Any provisions under subsection (4) — (a) which repeal or revoke, or alter, remove or add to any text of, any primary legislation may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly, and (b) are otherwise subject to negative resolution.’*</p>

Clause-by-Clause Scrutiny of the Bill

191. Having considered the written and oral evidence received on the Bill, the Committee undertook its formal Clause-by-Clause consideration at its meeting on 1 July 2026.
192. The related Minutes of Proceedings of the Committee's Clause-by-Clause consideration are in Appendix 1 and the Minutes of Evidence of the proceedings are in Appendix 2.
193. Committee Members David Brooks MLA, Jon Burrows MLA and Julie Middleton MLA indicated that, although they would not seek to divide the Committee, they do not support the principles of the Bill. They noted that this position is without prejudice to any decisions they may take at later legislative stages.
194. The Chair summarised that all Members were entitled to bring forward amendments at a later stage.

Formal Clause-by-Clause Consideration of the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

The Committee commenced its formal clause by clause consideration of the Bill.

Clause 1 – Modification of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986

The Committee considered its proposed four amendments to Clause 1 to provide that the phrase 'a financial payment' is amended to allow multiple payments to be paid during a holiday period.

Amendment 1

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 5

Leave out 'a financial payment' and insert 'financial payments'

Amendment 2

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 11

Leave out 'payment' and insert 'payments'

Amendment 3

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 14

Leave out 'payment' and insert 'payments'

Amendment 4

Clause 1, Page 2, Line 6

Leave out 'payment' and insert 'payments'

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendments as drafted.

The Committee considered its amendment to 1(1A) to remove potential ambiguity.

Amendment 5

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 6

Leave out 'who would normally be in attendance at school'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

The Committee considered its amendment to insert new paragraph 1BA which addresses the concern raised by the Department of Education.

Amendment 6

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 9

At end insert— '(1BA) Without prejudice to the generality of Article 58(1A), where a pupil is attending school on a day within any relevant period, that pupil shall be entitled to both the free school meal and the financial payment detailed in (1A).'

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

The Committee considered its amendment to insert new paragraph 1CA, which responds to an issue raised by the Department regarding the Bill's requirement that payments be made only to a nominated bank account. It is understood this approach may exclude a small number of eligible families who do not hold a bank account. Under the previous SHFG Scheme, the EA issued cheques in such cases. The amendment is intended to ensure that the statutory scheme provides equivalent flexibility and does not inadvertently prevent eligible households from receiving support.

Amendment 7

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 13

At end insert—

'(1CA) If an eligible parent does not have access to a bank account, the Authority shall, in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department, make the financial payments by an alternative method.'

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

The Committee considered its amendment to allow greater flexibility in light of concerns about variable costs. The Bill Proposer indicated that he would be content for the post-primary payment to be set at the level of the EA's daily meal allowance. The Committee's amendment gives effect to that position by specifying this approach in the Bill.

Amendment 8

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 14

Leave out from the second 'the' to the end of line 18 and insert—

'a daily allowance specified by the Authority, in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department.'

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

The Committee considered its amendment to give effect to the requirement that the daily allowance specified under the Bill be published on the EA website.

Amendment 9

Clause 1, Page 2, Line 10

Leave out from ‘current’ to ‘payable’ and insert ‘daily allowance specified’.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

The Committee considered its amendment to Clause 1, drafted based on feedback from the ESR, which suggested this would be more consistent with the language as drafted

Amendment 11

Clause 1, Page 1, Line 7

Leave out from “The category” to “children” on line 8 and insert—

‘Article 58(1A) applies to parents of pupils who’

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 1 as amended.

Clause 2 – Consequential amendments

The Committee considered its proposed amendment to allow flexibility for different holiday periods, drafted in response to an issue raised by the Department.

Amendment 10

Clause 2, Page 2, Line 16

Leave out from “the Summer” to the end of line 19 and insert—

‘(a) Summer holidays (all weekdays in July and August);

(b) Halloween (five weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A));

(c) Christmas (ten weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A));

(d) February mid-term (five weekdays specified in arrangements under Article

58(1A)); and

(e) Easter (ten weekdays specified in arrangements under Article 58(1A)).’

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 2 as amended.

Clause 3 – Interpretation

The Committee considered its proposed amendment drafted in response to advice from the ESR that the definition of “relevant period” should be on the face of *this* Bill.

Amendment 12

Clause 3, Page 2, Line 24

At end insert—

“relevant period” has the meaning given in Article 2(2) of the 1986 Order.’

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 3 as amended.

Clause 4 – Short title and commencement

The Committee considered its proposed amendment to insert a new paragraph to Clause 4 to enhance the level of Assembly control in respect of any draft regulations laid under Clause 4(4).

Amendment 13

Clause 4, Page 2, Line 35

At end insert—

‘(5) Any provisions under subsection (4) —

(a) which repeal or revoke, or alter, remove or add to any text of, any primary legislation may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly, and

(b) are otherwise subject to negative resolution.’

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the amendment as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 4 as amended.

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings – 15 April 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 22 April 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 29 April 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 6 May 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 27 May 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 3 June 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 10 June 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 17 June 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 24 June 2026

Minutes of Proceedings – 1 July 2026

Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

Minutes of Evidence – 15 April 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 29 April 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 6 May 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 27 May 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 3 June 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 17 June 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 24 June 2026

Minutes of Evidence – 1 July 2026

Appendix 3: Memoranda and Correspondence from the Bill sponsor

Briefing Paper on the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill – Summary

Correspondence – RaISe Scrutiny Response

Appendix 4: Memoranda and Papers from the Department for Education

Correspondence – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (11 June 2026)

Appendix 5: Written submissions

AdviceNI Call for Evidence – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

AdviceNI - Holiday Hunger Key Points

Community Advice Causeway – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill – Call for Evidence

The Community Foundation NI Response to the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Consultation

Foyle Network Foundation – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill – Call for Evidence (1 June 2026)

Dr Sinéad Furey – Call for Evidence - Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (10 June 2026)

Dr Sinéad Furey and Professor Jayne Woodside – Call for Evidence - Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (18 May 2026)

Correspondence to Dr Sinéad Furey & Professor Jayne Woodside (1 June 2026)

HERe NI – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill – Call for Evidence (20 May 2026)

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – Briefing for Education Committee: Holiday Hunger PMB, June 2026

NICCY – Summary of Evidence to Committee for Education on ‘Education (Holiday Meals Payments) Bill’ (June 2026)

Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group (NIWBG) Response to the Call for Evidence On The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Nourishing NI – Call for Evidence: Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Evidence Submission on Behalf of Nourishing Northern Ireland, part of the Feeding Britain network

Rural Community Network Response to the Call for Evidence: Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Storehouse (NI) – Call for Evidence - Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (6 June 2026)

UNISON – Response to “Holiday Hunger Private Members’ Bill Consultation” (June 2026)

Women’s Policy Group NI Response to Call for Evidence - Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (June 2026)

Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University – Response to: Call for Evidence - Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (June 2026)

Youth Assembly – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill: Summary of Youth Assembly views (May 2026)

Appendix 6: Other papers

AdviceNI correspondence – Automatic enrolment to free school meals for Universal Credit claimants (20 April 2026)

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs – The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Department for Communities – Automatic Enrolment for Free School Meals for Universal Credit Claimants (12 June 2026)

Department for Communities – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (12 June 2026)

Department for Communities – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill (19 June 2026)

Appendix 7: Assembly Research Papers

The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill [NIAR 114-2026]

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