

## A Briefing Paper on the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

### **Introduction**

The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill is about legislating to provide direct support to children and young people entitled to free school meals throughout school holiday periods.

Holiday hunger is a reality in the north. Approximately 90, 000 children are eligible for free school meals.<sup>1</sup> However, this entitlement ends when school terms are complete. Consequently, a cliff edge scenario exists for many families who are struggling financially.

The proposed legislation will place a statutory duty on the Department of Education and the Education Authority to put in place a scheme to provide financial payments in lieu of free school meals during school holidays to those children and young people who are eligible.

During school holidays, the issue of child hunger is further exacerbated, whereby children and young people are known to experience holiday hunger, as well as social isolation, which are thought to intensify the differences in educational attainment.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence suggests that some children returning to school can often be weeks or months intellectually behind classmates who have access to a more wholesome diet during school holidays.<sup>3</sup>

The links between deprivation and underachievement are well known. The 2024 Audit Office report into child poverty highlighted that the attainment gap between children and young people growing up in poverty and their peers starts early and lasts throughout school. Children and young people receiving free school meals are twice as likely to leave school with no GCSEs.<sup>4</sup>

The Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy 2025-2035 has set out that 60% of school leavers entitled to free school meals achieved at least 5 GCSEs at A\*-C standard (including English and Maths), compared to 84% of those who do not receive free school meals.<sup>5</sup> The correlation between poverty and outcomes is clear.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202024-25\\_0.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202024-25_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>

[https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/480578155/The\\_Consequences\\_of\\_the\\_Cuts\\_to\\_Education\\_for\\_Children\\_and\\_Young\\_People\\_in\\_Northern\\_Ireland\\_Final.pdf](https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/480578155/The_Consequences_of_the_Cuts_to_Education_for_Children_and_Young_People_in_Northern_Ireland_Final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/hungry-holidays-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/ni-executive-anti-poverty-strategy-2025-2035.pdf>

In the north, between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 60, 831 (74%) of the parcels provided by food banks in the Trussell Trust network were for families with children. This represents a record level of need.<sup>6</sup>

In April 2023, as a result of budget cuts, the School Holiday Food Grant (SHFG) scheme ended. The Trussell Trust reported that it gave out 49% more food parcels to families in July and August 2023, after the grant was axed, than it did in the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Legislation is needed now to make a long-term commitment so that children, who need free school meals, and their families, are supported to ensure they get the nutrition they need to help them fulfil their potential.

### **The Policy Context**

Support for families with the cost of food for children during school holiday periods varies across Ireland and the UK. Over the last number of years, there has been a proliferation of charitable food initiatives amidst growing concerns over children's experiences of hunger; most notably, food banks providing emergency food supplies to people in need, breakfast clubs, and programmes to alleviate out of term hunger.

The majority of these initiatives have been provided on an ad-hoc basis by a range of organisations, including community groups, churches and local councils. Some government-led initiatives were available before the onset of COVID-19 and further provision was made during the pandemic to provide for children entitled to free school meals during school holidays.

The Scottish Government funds free school meals payments during school holidays for eligible families. In England and Wales, local government-run programmes also provide healthy meals for children during school holidays.

During summer 2025, eligible schools in the south received funding to make lunches available for the summer programme, which typically runs for between two and four weeks in July or August. The summer programme is aimed at supporting children with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.

The north is now an outlier because it has no current or planned policy to address holiday hunger. The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill will help to ensure that this anomaly is addressed.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-Northern-Ireland-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj550l11zjmo#:~:text=The%20Trussell%20Trust%20said%20it,would%20cost%20millions%20of%20pounds.>

## **Assembly and Other Research**

Assembly research suggests that households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity, and that single parents, and families with children, are some of the groups most likely to be at risk of food insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent increased cost of living are cited amongst the key drivers which have exacerbated food insecurity in the UK.

The consequences of food insecurity on children's lives are wide ranging, including adverse impacts on mental, physical and academic development.

Children who experience food insecurity are also likely to experience holiday hunger and consequently fall into a nutritional and calorie deficit during the school holidays.

Statistics produced by the Trussell Trust show that between 2018/19 and 2023/24, the north experienced the largest percentage increase in the distribution of emergency food parcels (143%), when compared with the UK as a whole (94%). Food parcel provision for children in the north has reached record levels.

## **Consultation Process**

The proposed Bill's e-consultation was launched on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024. It closed on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2025, after a period of 14 weeks.

The number of respondents was 1, 136 in total, reflecting a high level of interest from the public and stakeholders regarding the issue of holiday hunger.

The survey asked if respondents were doing so as individuals or on behalf of an organisation. This question wasn't mandatory and not all respondents answered it. Of those respondents who answered this question, 85.82% were responding as individuals, in comparison to 1.91% who were responding on behalf of an organisation.

A summary report of the consultation was published on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2025. The e-consultation was used to tease out support for ways to administer the scheme.

In addition to responses to the online consultation, written responses were received from UNISON NI, the Women's Policy Group and the Human Rights Commission.

UNISON NI stated that the implementation of a School Holiday Food Grant would help families in poverty and would help tackle the longstanding health and education inequalities our children and young people face.

The Women's Policy Group said that it would welcome the re-implementation of the School Holiday Food Grant scheme as a necessary mitigation to ensure that children do not go hungry over holiday periods.

The Human Rights Commission noted that international human rights treaty bodies have raised concerns regarding the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the cost of food in the UK.

The Human Rights Commission referred to a 2018 statement by Professor Philip Alston, the former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, following a visit to the UK, which considered the rise in the use of foodbanks.<sup>8</sup>

Professor Alston said:

*“Children are showing up at school with empty stomachs, and schools are collecting food on an ad hoc basis and sending it home because teachers know that their students will otherwise go hungry.”*

### **Direct Engagement with Stakeholders**

Direct engagement has taken place with a wide range of stakeholders, including the community and voluntary sector, charities, school leaders and youth workers:

- The Community Foundation
- Homeless Connect
- Barnardo's
- Save the Children
- Children in Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)
- West Belfast Partnership Board
- School Principals and Teachers

Strong support was given for the proposal during direct engagement with stakeholders. The proposed Bill is viewed as an important piece of the puzzle in tackling child poverty.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM\\_GB\\_16Nov2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf)

All the stakeholders view the implementation of legislation to tackle holiday hunger as a step in the right direction towards helping families in poverty and tackling the longstanding health and education inequalities our children and young people face.

A number of stakeholders raised the point that during term time, many schools take extra steps to ensure children receive a meal. Some schools provide free breakfast clubs and others have tried to extend free school meal provision where possible.

However, schools cannot do this by themselves. Their efforts to feed children have resulted in higher expenses. Small businesses and community and youth groups have gone above and beyond to ensure children do not go hungry during school holidays.

### **Consultation Responses**

Responses to the consultation demonstrate strong agreement (96.38%) that children and young people are more likely to do well in school if their family has greater food security during school holiday periods.

There is also strong agreement (97.88%) that free school meal support over school holidays would alleviate some financial pressure experienced by low-income families.

Almost all respondents (98.59%) agree that greater food security would have a positive impact on the physical and mental health of children and young people.

Regarding the proposal itself, the majority of respondents (95.59%) agree that legislation should be developed to address holiday hunger by ensuring that children and young people who are eligible for free school meals should have this entitlement, or payment in lieu of this entitlement, extended to cover school holiday periods.

Of those respondents who agree with the proposal, a majority (65.65%) feel that the form of support provided should be regular payments equivalent to the costs of free school meals. However, it is important to note that a number of respondents (26.03%) think that food vouchers should be provided, or that a meal should be provided (7.60%).

The majority of respondents (76.81%) think that the regular payment should be made weekly, while a smaller number (19.35%) think it should be fortnightly. There is majority support for regular payments being made directly to bank accounts (90.10%).

Strong support was demonstrated for the previous School Holiday Food Grant Scheme which ran between July 2020 and April 2023, with a majority (86.53%) agreeing that this scheme worked well and helped to address pupil well-being and educational outcomes.

While most respondents (59.70%) think that £27 fortnightly payment in lieu of free school meals is sufficient to cover school holiday periods, a substantial number of respondents (33.07%) don't think it is. This reflects the cost-of-living crisis and the increasing price of food.

Whilst this level of response and support is not unexpected given the Bill's objectives, the e-consultation provided important opportunity to reflect on the previous scheme and consider options for implementation.

## **Conclusion**

There is a significant body of research that links access to affordable, nutritious food to improved school performance and better mental health outcomes for children and young people.<sup>9</sup>

The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill was moved in the Assembly on the 1<sup>st</sup> March. It has since received further positive feedback from a wide range of stakeholders.

For example, Children in NI have described the proposal as a targeted, evidence-based intervention addressing a clear and pressing issue.

Barnardo's have said that legislative intervention to directly support families with the cost of holiday hunger is a key step forward for tackling child poverty.

The Holiday Hunger Bill is a necessary mitigation to ensure that children do not go hungry during school holiday periods and to provide much needed support to low-income families.

While it is only one small piece of the puzzle in ending child poverty, it will play a vital role in helping disadvantaged children throughout our communities.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cm youth/cost-living-crisis-young-people/report.html#heading-2>