



Department of

**Education**

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Aoibhinn Treanor  
Clerk to the Committee for Education  
Room 375a  
Parliament Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3XX

Rathgael House  
43 Balloo Road  
Rathgill  
BANGOR  
BT19 7PR

Tel No: (028) 9127 9303

Email: [graeme.mcfarland@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:graeme.mcfarland@education-ni.gov.uk)

[committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk)

11 June 2026

Your ref: 2026.371  
2026.359  
2026.358

Dear Aoibhinn

Thank you for your three items of recent correspondence (your ref. numbers shown above) relating to the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill.

Your letter of 4 June related to draft amendments to the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill. Departmental officials provided a table summarising the Department's concerns with the draft Bill to the Education Committee on 2 June. This was subsequently discussed when officials provided oral evidence on 3 June. The Department notes the subsequent discussion by the Committee when the Bill Sponsor indicated his intention to engage with the Bills Office in relation to any potential amendments that either he or the Committee may wish to propose. The Minister has confirmed that he has no current plans to take forward amendments to the Bill.

On 1 June you sent a letter referencing a recommendation from the Committee for Communities that assurance is sought from the Department of Education that it has or will engage with the Department for Communities on the treatment of holiday meal payments for the purpose of welfare benefits assessment. As the Bill places a duty on the Department to fund a payment to the parents of children eligible for free school meals, the issue raised by the Committee for Communities is outside the scope of the Bill and not within the policy responsibilities of the Department of Education. Therefore, no engagement has been undertaken on this matter with the Department for Communities and there are no plans to do so.

On 1 June you sought the Department's comments on a letter to the Committee from Hayley Smallwoods, who had raised a number of queries and concerns on a broad range of issues. A number of these are not within the purview of the Department of Education. Of those issues that relate to the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill, most relate to the specifics and rationale for the how the Bill was developed by the Bill Sponsor, for example, as a Private Member's Bill, it is not for the Department to have undertaken any form of impact assessment or consultation on the Bill. These would be

issues for the Bill Sponsor and therefore the Department would not be in a position to comment on such issues.

In the single issue to which it is possible for the Department to provide a response, Ms Smallwoods asked "*What and how was the rate set for free school meals initially?*" It is presumed that this relates to the level of the free school meals income threshold that applies to families in receipt of Universal Credit. The £14,000 income threshold level that applied from 2017-2024 was introduced by the then Education Minister to facilitate the introduction of Universal Credit as part of the UK-wide transition to Universal Credit from a range of legacy benefits. The income threshold was determined in seeking to broadly maintain the same level of free school meals entitlement as in previous years. The threshold was implemented following the completion of a full public consultation and equality screening exercise.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Graeme McFarland', written in a cursive style.

**Graeme McFarland**  
**Acting Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer**