

Education Committee

Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings, Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

11 June 2026

Re: Call for Evidence — Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

I write on behalf of Advice NI to express our strong support for clause 1, clause 2, clause 3, and clause 4 of the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill, and to submit evidence in support of the legislation.

Advice NI is a membership organisation in Northern Ireland that exists to provide leadership, representation and support for independent advice organisations to facilitate the delivery of high quality, sustainable advice services. Advice NI exists to provide its members with the capacity and tools to ensure effective advice services delivery. This includes advice and information management systems, funding and planning, quality assurance support, delivery of accredited and non-accredited training, social policy co-ordination, and ICT development.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this Call for Evidence and commend MLA Danny Baker for bringing forward this Bill. Placing holiday meal payments on a statutory footing is a straightforward, deliverable, and urgently needed step to protect children in Northern Ireland from hunger during school holiday periods and to help alleviate child poverty.

1. Evidence for and arguments in favour of holiday meal payments

Approximately 90,000 children in Northern Ireland are eligible for free school meals (FSMs) and for many, this is the single guaranteed nutritious meal of their day during term time. FSMs exist because there is acknowledgement at governmental level of the need for meals during term time and that they can help alleviate child poverty and food insecurity (for example, see <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/free-school-meals-entitlement-increased/>; <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FSM-Executive-Summary.pdf>; <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-anti-poverty-expert-advisory-panel-recommendations.pdf>; <https://www.resolvepoverty.org/free-school-meals-in-the-north-west/>; <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/no-child-left-behind-free-school-meals-all>; https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/recommendations_for_an_ni_anti-poverty_strategy_-_a_paper_from_members_of_the_aps_co_design_group_september_2022.pdf).

The benefits of FSMs are widely evidenced and accepted (again see these examples: <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FSM-Executive-Summary.pdf>; <https://niesr.ac.uk/blog/calls-expansion-free-school-meals-are-timely-and-warranted>; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68416b27578282a4b102c065/Free_school_meals_-_guidance_for_local_authorities_maintained_schools_academies_and_free_schools.pdf; <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/westminster-hall-debate-provision-free-school-meals-7-may-2024>; https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/misoc/reports/Impact_of_the_Universal_Infant_Free_School_Meal_policy.pdf; <https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/mar25-auto-enrolment-bill/>;

https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/media-files/promoting_good_nutrition_through_healthy_school_meals.pdf;
<https://niesr.ac.uk/blog/calls-expansion-free-school-meals-are-timely-and-warranted>;
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68416b27578282a4b102c065/Free_school_meals_-_guidance_for_local_authorities_maintained_schools_academies_and_free_schools.pdf;
<https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/westminster-hall-debate-provision-free-school-meals-7-may-2024>;
https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/misoc/reports/Impact_of_the_Universal_Infant_Free_School_Meal_policy.pdf;
<https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Feeding-Britain-FSM-registration-working-group-final-report-Nov-2024-v2.pdf>;
<https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/westminster-hall-debate-provision-free-school-meals-7-may-2024>;
https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/recommendations_for_an_ni_anti-poverty_strategy_-_a_paper_from_members_of_the_aps_co_design_group_september_2022.pdf).

FSMs are essential. However, they cover only the 190 days that children are in school. There are 175 other days in the year when children are not in school, yet their nutritional needs don't change when the school term is over and the need for free meals also exists during school holidays. The absence of free meals during school holidays creates a distinct and compounding pressure on family budgets and leads to holiday hunger. The additional cost of feeding children who would otherwise receive a free school meal arrives at the same time as other holiday-period costs: childcare, holiday schemes/activities, and the huge burden of school uniforms and shoes experienced particularly over the summer months. It all lands at once. And the recent hikes in food prices is set to increase that pressure even more. Food price inflation stands at 3.7%, running higher than the headline inflation rate of 3.4%. Food represents an unavoidable expense and cumulative price hikes – up over 37% since 2020 – puts huge stress on family budgets. Lower income families feel this even harder as they spend a significantly higher percentage of their disposable income on essentials like food.

During school holidays, when free school meals are not available, families face a cascade of difficult choices:

- Parents skip meals altogether or reduce their own food intake to prioritise their children's meals.
- They buy the cheapest, least nutritious food and not the food they want to give their children because it's all they can afford.
- Discretionary spending on activities, outings, and social events is eliminated entirely, isolating children during the holidays.
- Families take on debt – through credit cards or, in some cases, illegal money lenders - to bridge the gap, creating financial harm that extends well beyond the holiday period.
- Some families don't even look for help even when they're struggling, with parents reporting that they feel embarrassed or reluctant to use foodbanks, particularly with children present. This means the true scale of holiday hunger is likely to be under-represented in the available data.
- The mental load of managing meals and making ends meet across eight weeks causes immeasurable stress and anxiety for parents, undermining the wellbeing of the whole family.

The hunger prevalent during school holidays causes multiple problems. For instance, when children lose out on a nutritional lunch each day, their health suffers. And there can be greater

intake of unhealthy food choices with over consumption of cheaper foods that are often higher in fat, salt and sugar. Irregular meal patterns are common too. The reduced energy intake impacts on physical activity and interaction. All these factors negatively impact children on their return to school after the holidays including on their reading scores and educational attainment more generally (see https://www.nhdmag.co.uk/blog/holidayhunger@;https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/TFF_BP_At%20a%20Glance_FINAL.pdf; <https://www.bcvs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Prof%20Greta%20Defeyter%20Report.pdf>).

We have firsthand evidence in NI of the benefits of a holiday meal payment. The Summer Food Payment grant ran from July 2020 to March 2023 and provided payments during holiday periods to families of children entitled to FSMs, helping with the cost of feeding children when they weren't in school. These payments, worth £27 per child, were made fortnightly in lieu of a school meal and were introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. They continued with broad cross-party and civic support, reflecting the consensus that no child should go hungry because schools are closed. Research by Spyreli et al (2021) which studied the impact of Covid-19 on the food decisions of economically disadvantaged families in NI found that the Summer Food Payment grant, together with informal support offered through social circles, was crucial for parents, particularly lone parents who needed to reduce costs and feed their family with a limited budget. While the grant was operational, Advice NI advisers made fewer referrals to foodbanks during the summer months. For instance, in 2020 referrals to foodbanks during the summer were only 3% of the total referrals for the year, 81% lower than the average monthly referral that year; in 2022 foodbank referrals during the summer were 28% lower than the average monthly referral. The grant ended in March 2023, removing crucial support from families already struggling with increased costs of living and placing vulnerable children at further disadvantage and food insecurity. In the summer that followed end grant ending, our advisers noticed a rise in foodbank referrals with summer referrals being 21% higher than the average referrals per month. The increase in summer referrals has continued into 2024 and 2025. The need for holiday meal payments has not gone away; the statutory provision has.

2. What a statutory payment would change

The school holidays represent a predictable, recurring gap in their food security, and one that this Bill would permanently close. Families and practitioners alike are clear about the difference that a guaranteed, statutory payment would make. Although the financial relief is real and significant, it is not only a financial issue. It is about security, healthy eating, dignity, and the ability to plan. With a holiday meal payment:

- Families could plan meals across the holiday period rather than managing week to week in a state of anxiety.
- Children would have access to healthy, nutritious food throughout the holidays, not only when emergency support is available. This would mean improved nutrition during the holidays and improved mental health and wellbeing. In turn, this would mean improved educational achievement and no loss of educational memory; as well as an increase in confidence and skills.
- The pressure on families and family budgets would be reduced.
- Demand on foodbanks and emergency food aid during holiday periods would fall.
- Families would not need to apply, wait, or demonstrate need repeatedly — the payment would come as a right.
- The stigma associated with seeking food aid would be reduced for families who currently go without rather than ask for help.

There are some people might take the view that children should be fed by their parents during the holidays because availing of FMSs during term time will have saved them money. Others still might go further and say it should be the sole responsibility of parents to feed their children and that the state shouldn't have to meet that cost whether through free meals during school terms or outside of school terms. However the reality is, many families don't have the resources to pay for enough nutritious food across the holidays. This includes households where there are two adults working, where the striver and skiver accusation can't be made – although there's never any excuse to us that accusation about anyone. Continued economic crises, endless austerity, falling and stagnant incomes, and ever-increasing costs mean that being in work no longer guarantees that families will be able to afford basics such as food and energy. The Food Foundation's 2025 Broken Plate report says that "to afford the government-recommended healthy diet, the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 45% of their disposable income on food, rising to 70% for those households with children." Many households, including 'working' households, are in poverty not because they spend their money recklessly but because they simply have insufficient income in a world that is becoming more expensive to live in. It is no coincidence that the introduction of austerity as a public policy coincided with the emergence of foodbanks. And contrary to the view that low-income families are feckless spendthrifts incapable of spending their money responsibly and looking out for the welfare of their children, the truth is that most low-income families are wise stewards of their money who make sacrifices to ensure they do their best for their children, and who perform minor miracles in making their income go as far as possible. They could give the rest of the population lessons in budgeting.

3. The broader context

This Bill is one piece of a larger puzzle. Poverty in Northern Ireland is multi-dimensional — it shapes how children live, how they learn, and what opportunities are available to them — and no single measure will resolve it. But holiday meal payments are a concrete, deliverable step that addresses one of poverty's most direct and visible consequences: children going hungry.

The evidence on the relationship between hunger and educational attainment is clear. Children who are food insecure during holiday periods return to school in September less ready to learn — their concentration, behaviour, and ability to engage are all affected by inadequate nutrition over the preceding weeks. Tackling holiday hunger is therefore not only a welfare and health intervention; it is an educational one and sits squarely within the remit of this Committee.

The Bill sits within a broader policy context. The Stormont Executive has committed to a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy, and this legislation is precisely the kind of targeted, rights-based measure that Strategy should be delivering. Poverty does not pause for school holidays, and neither should the Assembly's response to it.

Working families are not immune. Community food projects across Northern Ireland report significant increases in the number of working poor families needing support during holiday periods — families who do not qualify for free school meals during term time but cannot absorb the additional costs that holidays bring. While this Bill rightly focuses on those already entitled, it makes visible a wider group who are struggling and highlights the need for the free school meal eligibility threshold to be kept under active review as part of any serious anti-poverty agenda.

4. Our ask

We call on the Education Committee, the Education Minister, the NI Executive, and the NI Assembly to progress the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill to its next stage and to pass all clauses as a matter of urgency.

We recognise that this Bill is one piece of the anti-poverty puzzle. We consider it a vital and deliverable step that will reduce hunger and stress, and it will uphold the dignity of children and families across Northern Ireland. Every year that passes without statutory provision is another year in which tens of thousands of children in Northern Ireland face food insecurity. The Education Committee has an opportunity to help end that. We urge you to take it.

Submitted by:

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