

## Holiday Hunger Key Points

I've noted that in the debate thus far, there is a broad consensus that this is the right thing to do, but there is doubt as to whether this is the right way to do it. In other words, whether this responsibility should sit with the Department of Education.

It is worth noting that in the white heat of Covid, when the focus was on getting support to the people, families and children that needed it ... in terms of school holiday food grants, it was the Department of Education that delivered the scheme.

If you look at the Notice published by the Department of Education in 2020 it says that the Notice is appropriate and proportionate to ensure compliance with Article 58(1) of the Education & Libraries (NI) Order 1986" regarding the Modification of duties in relation to a financial payment in lieu of meals.

As we know, **Article 58(1)** of the **Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986** establishes the statutory duty for local education boards in Northern Ireland to provide milk, meals, and related facilities for qualifying pupils.

At the time, in November 2020, Minister Weir said: "“This is a very worrying time for families particularly those with school age children and these payments will help to support them during school holiday periods. Access to a healthy nutritious meal should be a basic right for all children and it is vital that we continue this support to ensure children and young people come back to school after holiday periods, healthy and ready to learn. Their future depends on it.”

In June 2022 Minister McIlveen said: "School holidays can create significant financial pressure for parents on low incomes and the ongoing cost of living crisis is causing further strain on household budgets across Northern Ireland. That is why I am allocating £12.6million funding to provide the families of children entitled to free school meals with additional financial support over the summer holidays.

“At a time when many families are already financially vulnerable, this payment will help to ensure that more than 100,000 of our children and

young people can continue to access healthy, nutritious food this summer.”

So the legislative precedent has been set, the approach has not been challenged, it has been endorsed by the Assembly, by the Executive, by Education Ministers and by the Department of Education

It must also therefore be fair to say that given this support has previously been provided by and delivered through the Department of Education, whether to seek to deliver it via any other Department (for example through the Department for Communities), could be deemed to be challengeable in law. It would seem to me to be a much riskier proposition to try to deliver this support in any other way than has already been proven in terms of effectiveness and in terms of legal efficacy.

The DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY SCREENING into the Discontinuation of School Holiday Food Grant (SHFG) payment scheme at the end of 2022/23 financial year, explicitly states that:

“Following the Executive decision to introduce a SHFG scheme, as an interim measure, the Department of Education was responsible for developing the policy and bidding for ring-fenced funding. **As the Education Authority already makes payments for Uniform Grants to families who are entitled to free school meals, it has the systems already in place to process the SHFG payments.** As an arms length body of the Department of Education, following the allocation of ring-fenced funding for the SHFG to the Department by the Department of Finance, the Education Authority has then been provided with earmarked funding specifically for the purposes of the SHFG scheme.

“Through the use of the free school meals eligibility criteria, SHFG payments are specifically targeted at supporting low income families. SHFG payments have provided targeted support to family budgets and home life, particularly in light of the ongoing pressures on the cost of living. The discontinuation of the SHFG scheme would remove this form of support and potentially result in more families having to seek alternative forms of support such as the use of food banks.”

**Kevin Higgins**  
**Head of Policy**  
**Advice NI**