

Education Committee
N.Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings, Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

1st June 2026

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

Dear Committee Members,

We are writing to you as an organisation that works every day with families in our community who are struggling. We want to tell you why we support all clauses (clause 1, clause 2, clause 3, and clause 4) in the Holiday Meal Payments Bill and why we believe it matters.

Foyle Network Foundation is a leading anti-poverty charity dedicated to tackling hunger and reducing hardship across the Foyle area. Through the provision of food and essential household items, combined with comprehensive wraparound support, we help households increase income, address financial pressures, and build long-term stability. Our model integrates crisis response with sustained, person-centred support to create lasting change.

FNF operates in Derry-Strabane, a district characterised by persistent poverty and health inequality. Recent research shows that 27% of people in Derry City & Strabane lived in relative income poverty between 2019 and 2022, one of the highest rates in Northern Ireland.

Health outcomes are worse than the Northern Ireland average: life expectancy at birth is 77.7 years for men and 81.4 years for women, and almost all health indicators (including respiratory disease and mental health) are poorer than the NI average.

School holidays are one of the hardest times of year for the families we work with. When term ends, the free school meal ends with it, and for a lot of families, that meal was the one thing they could count on. The holidays, especially the eight weeks of the summer holidays, are a long time to have to provide healthy, nutritious meals on an impossibly tight budget.

During the summer holidays we see a significant rise in families seeking our support, with many coming to us for the first time. This reflects the increased financial pressure households face when school meals stop and children are at home.

The cost of feeding the family goes up significantly at the same time as the cost of childcare, school holiday activities, school uniforms and shoes. It all lands at once.

Hunger doesn't happen in isolation. It's a symptom of financial pressure, impossible choices, and support systems that don't stretch far enough. When families come to us, it's rarely about food alone – it's about everything that sits underneath it.

During summer months we supply breakfast and snacks to around 20 organisations across the City providing summer activities, last year we also provided hot lunches for a smaller number and in total 1,500 children were supported. This year we have 30 organisations already registering proving the need to support children and families with holiday food provision is growing. This burden should not fall to the community and voluntary sector, but should be financed and funded by NI Executive.

Below are some quotes from parents from last year's programme:

- Parents highlighted that the daily meals were a huge support, both financially and practically.
- "Knowing they had a healthy breakfast and lunch each day really eased the pressure at home."
- "It helped us manage the weekly food budget during the summer."
- "It was reassuring to know they were well fed as well as well entertained."

We are asking the Education Committee, the Education Minister, the NI Executive, and the NI Assembly to move the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill to its next stage and to pass all clauses without delay.

The Executive has committed to an Anti-Poverty Strategy. This Bill is exactly the kind of practical step that such a Strategy should produce. It will not end poverty. But it will mean that tens of thousands of children here do not go hungry because schools are closed.

Many organisations will provide evidence on this Bill. Our intention has been to show you what these decisions mean for real families in our community. Their request is modest but urgent, that their children are protected from hunger during the school holidays. We are asking you to use this Bill to make that happen.

Yours sincerely

Karen Mullan, Director

Foyle Network Foundation