



HERE NI
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Education Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings, Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX
Date 20/5/26

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.

HERE NI support LGBTQIA+ women and their families across Northern Ireland.

We are not here to make a political argument. We are here to tell you what we see, what the families we work with tell us, and why we believe this Bill would make a genuine difference to their lives.

What we see

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 holidays, we see parents who are stressed in a way that is different from the rest of the year. 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. We see parents skipping meals, or living on cereal or toast, so their children can eat. We see families buying the cheapest, least nutritious food because it's all they can afford, not the food they want to give their children. We see people coming to the Community and Voluntary Sector for help with the costs of food, many of whom for the first time, embarrassed, because they have never needed help before and do not know how to ask for it.

At HERe NI we have given out 146 supermarket vouchers since January to LGBTQIA+ women who are struggling financially. Many women from our organisation have caring responsibilities or are out of work due to illness, and are finding it extremely hard to make ends meet.

We also know that not everyone asks for help. Some families would rather go without than walk through our doors with their children watching. That means the true picture is worse than what we can count.

What families tell us

The families we work with are not a statistic. They are parents who want the best for their children, many who are working hard, who are doing everything right and who are still not able to make the money stretch across the holidays.

One woman, who was coming to collect a supermarket voucher said she “ran out of food [that] morning” and the supermarket voucher from HERe NI was the only thing that she could use to buy more for that week.

Hunger is not just about food. It is about the stress of not knowing how you are going to feed your children tomorrow. It is about children missing out on activities because there is no money left after the food shop or paying other necessary bills. It is about parents lying awake at night doing sums that do not add up. A holiday meal payment would not solve everything, but it would take one of those worries off the table.

Why this Bill matters

This Bill is one piece of a bigger puzzle. Poverty in Northern Ireland is real, it is growing, and it affects children in ways that follow them long after the holidays are over. Children who do not eat well during the holidays go back to school less ready to learn. Teachers see it. We see it. The evidence is there.

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 in Northern Ireland do not go hungry because schools are closed.

We also want to be honest about the limits of what we, as community organisations, can do on our own. We have been filling this gap for years, through foodbanks, holiday schemes, community meals, often on short-term funding that may or may not be there next year. That is not a sustainable way to make sure children are fed. A statutory payment would mean families do not have to rely on whether an organisation like ours has managed to secure a grant or has sufficient resources to provide the support and services that families need.

What we are asking for

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.

Another year without provision is another year of families struggling. And all the while prices, especially food prices, continue to rise.

Parents and carers are not asking for very much. They are asking for the reassurance that their children will not go hungry during the school holidays. We are asking you to make it happen.

Yours sincerely,

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