



NI WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON THE EDUCATION (HOLIDAY MEAL PAYMENTS) BILL

Committee for Education

Prepared by Alexandra Brennan (Coordinator) of NIWBG

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The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia and wider civil society in Northern Ireland, with the aim of implementing a gender equal economy. The members of the NIWBG scrutinise policy and budgetary matters with a gendered lens to bring attention to the different ways in which women and men are affected by government-level decision-making. It aims to provide policy- and budget-makers with policy analysis to secure substantive equality for women and men through the assessment of gender impact.

The NIWBG works with a range of organisations in Northern Ireland on devolved issues and with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland on East-West and North-South issues.

We hope that our response to the consultation will be considered by the Committee for Education.

If there are any questions or comments regarding the NIWBG's response, please direct them to the Coordinator for the NIWBG, Alexandra Brennan (info@niwbg.org).

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the *Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill*. In this response, we will:

- Highlight the need for this Bill
- Outline the importance of a cash-first approach
- Demonstrate the cross-departmental nature of children's poverty
- Call for the extension of this Bill to cover all holiday days

We encourage the Committee for Education to consider our response and we are available to meet with the Committee to further discuss our response. The NIWBG would also like to endorse the responses of the Women's Policy Group and the Women's Regional Consortium.

General Comments

We welcome the introduction of this Bill as we believe it will make a huge impact on the lives of people, particularly children, experiencing poverty. Over the course of the fiscal year 2022-23, both relative and absolute poverty increased in Northern Ireland¹, compared to a fall in child poverty in places like Scotland². Child poverty itself is a massive cost to the public purse, estimated to cost between £825 million and £1 billion per year. The NI Comptroller and Auditor General stated:

*"...an investment on reducing child poverty has the potential to result in significant long-term savings for the public purse as well as mitigating future harms caused to children as a result of growing up in poverty."*³

Often times families cannot afford to feed their children, let alone feed their children healthy food. 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 children⁴. This has knock-on health impacts that follow children into their adult lives.

Children's poverty is also women's poverty; before children go without food, heat, new clothing, etc., women bear the brunt of these impacts for as long as they can before they cannot help it from impacting on their children⁵. Women are more likely to take on

¹ Public Accounts Committee (2024). *Public Accounts Committee – Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*. (<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/public-accounts/reports/report-on-child-poverty-in-northern-ireland/>)

² Child Poverty Action Group (2025). *Child poverty statistics – new record high and further breakdowns*. (<https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-statistics-new-record-high-and-further-breakdowns>)

³ NI Audit Office (2024). *Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*. ([NI Audit Office Report - Child Poverty in Northern Ireland.pdf](#))

⁴ The Broken Plate (2025). *The State of the Nation's Food System*. ([TFF BP At a Glance FINAL.pdf](#))

⁵ Women's Policy Group (WPG) (2021). *NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On* ([WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf \(wrda.net\)](#))

childcare responsibilities⁶ and are more likely to be lone parents (93%)⁷, and lone parents are particularly vulnerable to impacts from poverty due to living off of and taking care of children on a single income. Women are more likely to rely on benefits, be in low-paid and precarious work, earn below the living wage than men, and are more likely to be ‘economically inactive,’ with Northern Ireland having the highest rate of economic inactivity across the UK. A UK-based [Food Standards Agency](#) survey on household purchasing revealed that 64% of women reported having all or most of the responsibility for food shopping, compared to just 32% of men⁸. Women’s economic outcomes are significantly worse than men’s, demonstrating why anti-poverty policies like this Bill must be approached with a gendered lens.

The cash-first nature of this Bill is incredibly positive, as experts such as the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) state:

*“Default cash-first crisis payments provide **dignity, autonomy, and the ability to address specific needs** and are **efficient, flexible, and quick** to deliver”⁹*

Food parcels function as a stop gap measure, but in place of cash-first initiatives they remove choice from parents/children and may not suit their dietary needs, whether they be health-related or religion/culture-related. For example, households that need to maintain a gluten-free diet for one or more people have a weekly food shop that is 35% more expensive¹⁰. The cheapest gluten-free bread is 6.1 times more expensive than a loaf with gluten in it, and about 8 in 10 people struggled to afford gluten-free products with those in poverty the most disproportionately impacted¹¹. Cash-first initiatives are just one way to ensure children have a healthy diet that provides them with choice and allows them to meet their needs.

Funding and Extension of Bill Remit

This Bill is important to reducing and ultimately eliminating poverty in our society, however it cannot exist in a silo - we need coordinated efforts on behalf of all departments to tackle the root causes of poverty, with a specific focus on preventative measures. Therefore, funding for the Bill must be shared across Departments – both Department of Education and Department of Health have a part to play in ensuring

⁶ Women’s Policy Group (WPG) (2021). *NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On* ([WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf \(wrda.net\)](#))

⁷ WRDA (2025). *Women will be most impacted by new domestic rating measures* (<https://www.wrda.net/blog/women-will-be-most-impacted-by-new-domestic-rating-measures>)

⁸ Food Standards Agency (2019). *The Food and You Survey (The Food and You Survey - Wave 5)*

⁹ Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) (2026). *Building and maintaining cash-first momentum to tackle food insecurity ending the need for charitable food aid* ([file:///C:/Users/hkerr/Downloads/Keynote%20Speaker%20-%20IFAN%20&%20Cash%20First%20Momentum%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/hkerr/Downloads/Keynote%20Speaker%20-%20IFAN%20&%20Cash%20First%20Momentum%20(1).pdf))

¹⁰ Coeliac UK (2025). *Campaign to make gluten-free food more affordable and accessible* (<https://www.coeliac.org.uk/about-the-charity/cost-of-living/>)

¹¹ Ibid.

children do not go hungry when they are outside of school and subsequently do not face health inequalities due to the lack of nutritional, accessible food.

We would also like to see this Bill extended to school holiday days that were not included in this Bill, as no child should go hungry on any day away from school.

Conclusion

Again, we welcome the opportunity to respond to this Bill as we believe this is a positive development in the wider fight against poverty. We hope the Committee considers our response, and we are available to further explain our response should the Committee wish.