

Call for Evidence: Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Evidence Submission on Behalf of Nourishing Northern Ireland, part of the Feeding Britain network

We write on behalf of Nourishing Northern Ireland 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 from our frontline experience in support of the legislation.

1 INTRODUCTION

This submission presents evidence gathered directly from community food aid projects operating across Northern Ireland in support of the Holiday Meal Payments Bill, proposed by MLA Danny Baker. The evidence was collected through structured discussion with frontline practitioners who work daily with families experiencing food insecurity and is supplemented by first-hand accounts from families supported by these services.

The organisations contributing to this submission include community foodbanks, social supermarkets, summer food schemes, and family support projects. Collectively, they reach hundreds of families across Northern Ireland, including Belfast, Derry City and Strabane, and surrounding areas. Their evidence consistently and compellingly demonstrates the need for a statutory, rights-based holiday meal payment for the approximately 90,000 children entitled to free school meals in Northern Ireland.

The submission also draws on the 2017 report *Hungry Holidays* – a report on hunger amongst children during the school holidays which was written by Feeding Britain National Director, Andrew Forsey.

2 THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL HOLIDAYS ON FAMILIES IN FOOD POVERTY

Community food projects report that school holidays create a distinct and measurable pressure on family budgets. The withdrawal of free school meals removes what is, for many children, the one guaranteed nutritious meal of their day. Frontline workers describe this not as a minor inconvenience, but as a structural gap that forces families into impossible choices.

2.1 WHAT FAMILIES GO WITHOUT

Practitioners consistently identified the following impacts when holiday meal provision is absent:

- **Balanced, nutritious diets:** families resort to cheaper, less nutritious food, including processed and frozen meals, due to cost constraints.

- **Skipping meals:** Adults reducing their own food intake to prioritise feeding their children, a pattern reported repeatedly across projects.
- **Social disconnection:** The ability to participate in activities, outings, or social events is reduced as all discretionary spend is redirected to food.
- **Stress and anxiety:** the mental load of managing the additional financial cost of buying and cooking meals, in the absence of free school meals across six to eight weeks of summer, causes significant stress and anxiety.
- **Essential household items:** families being forced to choose between food and heating, clothing, or school uniforms.
- **Increased debt:** some families turning to credit cards or, in more serious cases, illegal money lenders to bridge the gap, creating long-term financial harm.

“Families spend their ‘free time’ worrying about meals and are then unable to do any fun things with their children — the holiday becomes a source of stress rather than rest.”

Community Food Project

2.2 EVIDENCE FROM FAMILIES DIRECTLY

The following accounts were shared by families supported by our network members:

“Summer, Easter, Christmas rolls around and because I am unable to work, I struggle feeding 2 young children. It can be exhausting when you already have health problems - the additional worry does not help. Free school meals just means I am able to ensure the children are well fed. Food is so expensive now, we try to eat healthy, I can’t even budget for fast food or treats in the summer because it takes up 3 days’ food costs.” **C, aged 39**

“8 weeks for summer is a long time. I counted it up and I need an extra £24 a week for my 2 children - so hundreds of pounds over the summer. I work term time and got free school meals; I don’t work during the summer because childcare is so expensive. I work. I shouldn’t struggle to feed my kids.” **L, aged 29**

“When we had the payments for food over the holiday during lockdown, it was a huge help. £15 a week extra bought so much fruit and veg. And then it stopped. I’ve had to use a food bank at Christmas and once in the summer. I don’t like it. I felt like a nothing doing it. I still have pride.” **S, aged 38**

3 INCREASED DEMAND AND FINANCIAL PRESSURE

School holidays bring a series of compounding costs which stretch already tight budgets to breaking point. Families face higher food bills alongside the expense of summer activities, childcare and (in August) school uniforms and shoes. These costs land together, leaving parents visibly stressed and often unable to afford any of them adequately.

Community food projects provide a uniquely reliable perspective into the lived experience of holiday food insecurity because families who would not otherwise seek statutory support often turn to them first. Their frontline observations are therefore a valuable contribution to this debate:

- Footprints Women’s Centre reports increased demand for emergency foodbank referrals and referrals to their social supermarket during school holiday periods, with waiting lists for summer schemes and family cookery programmes, specifically because families know that participation includes a nutritious meal.
- In 2025, Footprints recorded a 40% increase in working poor families needing food support — families who do not qualify for free school meals but are nonetheless struggling, particularly during holidays when childcare costs compound food costs.
- Donegall Pass Community Forum reports an increase in demand on family financial budgets during holidays due to the additional cost of food that would otherwise be covered by free school meals.
- In summer 2024, Donegall Pass Community Forum delivered the Summer Scran project following a successful application to CFNI’s Holiday Hunger grant fund. Over a six-week period in July and August, the project provided 1,720 lunch packs to forty-three children, covering five days per week. Each pack contained a hot meal, fruit, drinks, and yoghurts. Evaluation of the project found that 100% of participating parents reported the support helped them save money, enabling them to redirect limited finances towards school uniforms and activities for their children.
- Since 2023, Foyle Network Foundation has consistently seen an increase in families with school age children using the foodbank during summer and holiday periods. Many are first time users and only need support during these periods.
- More generally, projects report a spike in debt support needs in September, following the summer holiday period, reflecting families’ attempts to bridge the gap through borrowing.

3.1 THE ‘WORKING POOR’ AND THOSE NOT CAPTURED IN CURRENT ELIGIBILITY

A consistent theme across projects is that the current eligibility threshold for free school meals means many struggling families receive no support. Working families who lose term-time income over the summer (due to childcare costs making employment unviable) face a double pressure: no income and no entitlement. Community projects are absorbing this demand. The Bill’s scope, while rightly focused on those currently entitled to free school meals, should be understood as a floor, not a ceiling, and the broader issue of eligibility thresholds warrants attention.

4 THE CASE FOR A STATUTORY RIGHT

A significant theme to emerge from feedback from our network is the distinction between a discretionary scheme and a statutory right. Projects and families alike have direct experience of what the loss of a discretionary scheme means in practice: the school holiday food grant was withdrawn in March 2023, and the effects have been consistently visible in increased foodbank usage, increased debt, and increased stress.

4.1 WHAT STATUTORY FOOTING WOULD CHANGE

Practitioners identified the following concrete changes that statutory provision would deliver:

- Reduction in stress and anxiety for families, who would be able to plan ahead rather than waiting to learn whether a payment would be made.
- Lower foodbank usage during school holiday periods. Projects note evidence already exists showing that when parents are supported, emergency food aid demand falls.
- Improved nutrition for children, with greater food security enabling healthier food choices rather than the cheapest available options.
- Reduced trauma associated with hunger and food insecurity among children.
- Fewer families falling into debt to cover food costs during holiday periods.
- Removal of the application process and associated waiting periods, which are a barrier for some of the most vulnerable families.

4.2 DIGNITY, RIGHTS, AND THE WIDER POLICY CONTEXT

Several of our network members raised the importance of framing this provision in terms of dignity and rights. Families accessing foodbanks for the first time during summer holidays - often described as proud, working people who do not see themselves as needing charity - experience stigma and shame. A statutory payment normalises support and removes that barrier. It is also consistent with the principle of children's right to adequate nutrition.

Projects also noted that grants are available in other jurisdictions to youth and community organisations to support food provision alongside summer activities and called for equivalent support in Northern Ireland. Statutory payments to families and grant support to community providers should be complementary, not mutually exclusive.

4.3 A NOTE ON PAYMENT LEVEL

Practitioners welcomed the proposed payment mechanism but noted that the previous rate of £27 per fortnight per child no longer reflects current food costs. The proposed rate of just over £3 per day (aligned to the cost of a school meal from January 2026)

represents a more appropriate baseline, though providers would encourage ongoing review to ensure the payment keeps pace with food price inflation.

5 RESPONDING TO ARGUMENTS RAISED DURING THE SECOND READING

During the Second Reading debate on 13 April 2026, a number of arguments were raised against the Bill. We address the principal objections below, drawing on our evidence from frontline community food projects across Northern Ireland and our extensive experience researching and responding to ‘holiday hunger’.

5.1 THIS IS A WELFARE PAYMENT, NOT AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

It was argued that food poverty during school holidays is a welfare matter belonging to the Department for Communities rather than the Department of Education, and that the EA only administered the previous scheme as an emergency expedient during COVID.

Our evidence does not support a clean separation between food security and educational outcomes. Frontline practitioners consistently report that children who have gone without adequate nutrition during school holidays return to school visibly less ready to learn. This is corroborated by wider research: our evidence shows that children who experience food poverty during school holidays return to school malnourished and sluggish, starting the new term several weeks, if not months, intellectually behind peers who have had a more adequate diet. The direct line from holiday hunger to impaired educational readiness and attainment makes this squarely an educational concern.

The Bill amends an existing Education Order and extends an existing educational duty into holiday periods. It does not create a new welfare jurisdiction. The infrastructure, data, and payment mechanisms already sit with the Education Authority. The previous scheme’s administration through the EA was not merely an emergency convenience, it reflected the fact that the EA is best placed to reach the 90,000 identified, entitled children quickly and reliably.

The Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 envisages exactly the kind of cross-departmental response that critics of the Bill advocate. However, three years without statutory provision have demonstrated that the absence of legislation produces an absence of action. This Bill establishes a statutory floor while broader inter-departmental co-ordination develops.

5.2 THE BILL IS UNAFFORDABLE - IT IMPOSES AN UNFUNDED DUTY ON AN ALREADY STRETCHED EDUCATION BUDGET

Concerns were raised that the Bill would impose a recurring cost of £20–31 million on the Education budget at a time of acute financial pressure, and that Members voting for it would in effect be voting to cut other educational services.

We respectfully submit that this framing omits the cost of inaction. Our evidence from community food projects across Northern Ireland documents the visible, measurable consequences of three years without provision: increased foodbank usage, increased household debt, and increased stress and anxiety. Food banks have reported a 49% spike in demand following the withdrawal of the grant in March 2023.

The Donegall Pass Summer Scrان project evaluation found that when support was provided, 100% of families were able to redirect savings to school uniforms and activities which are precisely the kinds of costs that, without support, drive families into debt repayable in September. In 2023/2024 Advice NI's debt service dealt with 3,385 with debts amounting to £44.1m. The average amount of personal debt in the same year was £12,989. Research by the NI Consumer Council¹ found that the most common costs of debt in Northern Ireland include 'housing, household bills and *high interest lending often taken out to cover essentials such as food.*'

Furthermore, UK based research by the Food Foundation², illustrated the intertwined nature of food insecurity and mental health, finding that in June 2024, people living with a mental health condition in the UK were over twice as likely to be living in food insecure households (28%).

On the long-term cost comparison, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has estimated that tackling child poverty costs between £850 million and £1 billion per year. A £20 million statutory payment that reduces educational underachievement, poor health outcomes, and downstream costs across health, justice, and welfare systems represents a sound use of public money relative to those eventual costs.

The official School Meals in Northern Ireland 2024–25 statistical bulletin (Department of Education, June 2025) confirms that 90,935 pupils are currently entitled to free school meals, with an uptake rate of 80.8%. The Bill's financial memorandum which is based on Assembly Research and Information Service figures, correctly accounts for this real-world uptake rather than assuming 100% take-up, providing a credible cost baseline for scrutiny.

We respectfully suggest that the Bill could be strengthened by amendment to require Executive-level ring-fenced funding rather than drawing solely on the Department of Education's budget. Several Members raised this possibility during the debate, and we would support such an amendment.

¹ <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/news/debt-crisis-deepens-research-reveals-average-personal-debt-has-soared-ps13000>

² https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Mental%20health%20and%20food%20insecurity%20briefing_updated.pdf

5.3 THERE IS NO GUARANTEE THE MONEY WILL BE SPENT ON FOOD

The Minister of Education and others argued that, unlike a school meal directly provided to a child, a cash payment to a parent carries no guarantee that it will be spent on food.

Our evidence directly contradicts this concern. The testimony gathered from families in our network is consistent: the previous payments were used for food. As one parent in our submission records, “£15 a week extra bought so much fruit and veg.” The Donegall Pass Summer Scran evaluation, a project that provided direct food provision rather than cash, found that 100% of participating parents reported being able to save money on food as a result of the support, enabling them to redirect funds to school uniforms and activities. This is precisely the pattern cash-transfer evaluations consistently demonstrate: low-income families spend additional income predominantly on food and essentials.

We would also observe that the argument, if taken to its logical conclusion, implies that parents in poverty cannot be trusted with money for their children’s food. Our network strongly rejects that characterisation. The testimony of families receiving support from our members, parents who describe counting up the weekly cost of feeding their children to the pound, who speak of pride and who avoid food banks out of dignity, reflects responsible, resourceful people managing incredibly difficult financial constraints. A statutory entitlement payment respects that dignity.

It is also worth noting that community-based activity and food provision, such as the HAF model cited during the debate, and direct payments are **complementary, not alternative**, approaches. The Bill does not foreclose the development of activity-based provision.

5.4 THE BILL IS POORLY TARGETED - MANY CHILDREN IN POVERTY FALL OUTSIDE FREE SCHOOL MEAL ELIGIBILITY

The Committee Chair and others cited evidence that 41% of children in poverty do not qualify for free school meals, raising the concern that the Bill’s targeting could miss those most in need while providing payments to some who are not in poverty.

We acknowledge this limitation and have raised it explicitly in our submission: the Bill’s scope “should be understood as a floor, not a ceiling, and the broader issue of eligibility thresholds warrants attention.” A consistent theme in our evidence is the number of working families who fall just outside entitlement for example Footprints Women’s Centre recorded a 40% increase in working poor families needing food support in 2025. These families deserve attention and we call on the Committee to consider widening the eligibility threshold.

However, the imperfection of the targeting does not negate the Bill’s value for the 90,000 children who are identified and entitled during termtime. Our evidence, and wider

research, consistently identifies free school meal-entitled children as those at greatest risk during school holidays: between 40% and 90% of children helped by holiday food projects are those who usually receive free school meals during term time. The argument that the Bill misses some children in poverty is an argument for strengthening it, not defeating it. The Committee Stage provides the appropriate forum to explore amendments that could extend coverage.

5.5 “COMMUNITY PROVISION IS THE BETTER ROUTE - THE BILL TREATS SYMPTOMS RATHER THAN CAUSES

It was suggested during the debate that the £20 million could be better spent on structural educational interventions, or that voluntary and community-based food provision represents a superior model to cash payments.

Our evidence speaks directly to this question. Our network’s projects - community foodbanks, social supermarkets, summer food schemes, and family support projects - do invaluable work, but they operate on a fragile, grant-by-grant basis. In the absence of a policy and funding framework, akin to the HAF programme in England, they cannot provide the consistency, predictability, or coverage that a statutory entitlement delivers. As our submission sets out, families in the most deprived communities need to be able to plan: a statutory programme allows them to budget ahead rather than waiting each year to learn whether a discretionary grant will be available. The withdrawal of the previous scheme in March 2023 is a clear demonstration of what the absence of statutory footing means in practice.

Our evidence also makes clear that the alternative being offered is not a better-targeted £20 million intervention, it is to do nothing. Three years without provision have not seen the Education Department or the Executive introduce an alternative scheme. The anti-poverty strategy referenced during the debate has received no budget allocation. In that context, the argument that the money could be better spent is, in practice, an argument for continued inaction.

Treating a symptom has value when the symptom is severe, the causes are long-term, and the treatment is deliverable now. The Bill is deliverable. It builds on an existing infrastructure, draws on established eligibility data, and addresses a predictable, recurring crisis. We urge the Committee to recommend its passage.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence from community food projects operating in Northern Ireland’s most deprived communities is unambiguous: school holidays create an all too predictable, recurring crisis for families with children entitled to free school meals. The withdrawal of provision since March 2023 has had visible, measurable consequences. Community

and voluntary organisations have partially filled the gap, but on a fragile, grant-by-grant basis that cannot provide the consistency or security that families need.

The Nourishing Northern Ireland Network strongly supports the Holiday Meal Payments Bill and call on the Assembly to:

- Pass the Bill as a matter of urgency, providing statutory footing for holiday meal payments covering summer, Christmas, Halloween, and half-term breaks.
- Set the payment at a level that reflects the actual cost of providing nutritious meals, with a mechanism for annual review.
- Explore amendment of the Bill to provide for Executive-level ring-fenced funding, so that the cost is shared across government rather than borne solely by the Department of Education budget, but not use this exploration as a means of delay.
- Recognise that this Bill, while one piece of the anti-poverty puzzle, is a vital and deliverable step that will reduce hunger, reduce stress, and uphold the dignity of children and families across Northern Ireland.

And that being the case consider the following for future actions

- Explore complementary grant support for community and voluntary organisations providing food and activities during holiday periods.
- Consider the broader eligibility threshold for free school meals, given the evidence of significant need among working families who do not currently qualify.
- Consider introducing a ‘chance to object’ model of free school meal registration, to maximise take-up among those who are eligible.