

Children in Northern Ireland



Evidence submitted to the Public Accounts Committee as part of the Inquiry into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

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Who we are:

[Children in Northern Ireland \(CiNI\)](#) is the regional umbrella organisation for the children's sector in Northern Ireland. With over 120 members, CiNI is accountable for representing and giving voice to the experiences, views and aspirations of its members across NI to inform and influence those who make policy or plan and deliver services for children and young people. Our vision is to make Northern Ireland a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish.

Why we are submitting evidence to the PAC:

The NIAO's report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland highlights serious flaws in previous Executive strategies to tackle the systemic disadvantage faced by many young people. It sets out the lack of significant progress on the main indicators, a lack of relevant targets, no ring-fenced budget, and a lack of early intervention and preventative action. Therefore we welcome the Public Accounts Committee Inquiry and the focus on children and young people experiencing disadvantage and material deprivation. From our work managing a range of healthy food and physical activity programmes aimed at addressing child food insecurity, we are all too aware of the challenges faced by low-income families when government support falls short. We would like to take this opportunity, while the PAC is considering evidence as part of its inquiry, to highlight serious concerns and disparities regarding children's access to food and government decision-making on support schemes aimed at reducing child food insecurity. We believe that this is one of the most harmful impacts of growing up in poverty, and would encourage the PAC to examine the detail of public spending on this particular issue compared to neighbouring jurisdictions.

What we want the NI Executive to prioritise:

CiNI welcome the comments and evidence presented from other key stakeholders including the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Barnardo's, and Goretta Horgan - who all emphasise the urgent need for a new Executive Anti-Poverty Strategy that is evidence-based, includes targets, a clear action plan, and has the tangible effects of reducing costs for low-income families and raising their incomes. We also want to see a specific focus on child food insecurity, given the serious harm it causes to children's health and wellbeing, and their long-term future. The two main policy decisions that have been absent since the return of the Assembly and restoration of the Executive in early 2024 are: restoration of the School Holiday Food Grant and amending the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals in order to widen access to children in need. We also need to see long-term

sustainable investment in holiday food and activity programmes designed to address food insecurity and break intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage through empowering young people to develop skills and access opportunities.

Child Food Insecurity in NI

The main official statistics gathered in NI that relate to food poverty are through the [Health Survey](#) (commissioned by the Department of Health) and the [Family Resources Survey](#) (managed by the Department for Communities). The most recent figures suggest that 1 in 10 households experience food insecurity in Northern Ireland, however you are more likely to struggle to access enough food if you are in receipt of income-related benefits, live in social housing, or live with someone with a disability. According to the Health Survey results for 2022/23, roughly 1 in 10 people in the lowest income quintiles said that they could not afford to eat meals with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day, could not afford a roast joint (or equivalent) once a week, and went at least one day in the previous fortnight where they did not eat a substantial meal because of a lack of money.

According to the [Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality report 2022-23](#), children are more likely to be living in poverty than the population average. Coupled with the limited official data on food security outlined above, we contend that this means children are at a much higher risk of not having enough food. The most recent report states that approximately 13%, or 58,000, of all children live in 'food insecure' households. However this figure rises to 25% of children who are currently categorised as living in relative or absolute poverty.

In 2023, CiNI facilitated some [youth-led research](#) on the impact of the rise in cost-of-living to hear directly from children and young people about some of the ways that food insecurity, and poverty more generally, affects their lives. Our Youth Advisory Group, which helps shape the holiday programmes we deliver and campaigns for more support for young people, conducted a survey of 210 children and young people across NI, aged between 11 and 25. The survey consisted of several questions designed to gauge young people's awareness of the cost-of-living crisis and its effects on their households. It also covered issues such as parental financial stability, cost-cutting measures, experiences of deprivation (e.g. hunger, cold), and the impact on education and social participation.

A considerable percentage of respondents (49%) to the survey expressed concerns about their parent(s)/carer(s) not having enough money to meet their

essential needs. This finding underscores the financial strain experienced by families and the potential impact on the well-being of children and young people. It suggests that roughly half of young people surveyed are worried about their family's ability to afford basic items and essentials. The research revealed that a substantial portion of households (60%) reported the need to reduce their spending to ensure they had enough money. This often entailed cutting back on heating expenses (50%) and reducing food shopping (29%). These measures indicate the challenges faced by families in meeting basic needs while navigating the rising costs of essential goods and services.

The study found that 33% of respondents reported feeling colder more often compared to the previous year. This suggests that households may be experiencing difficulties in maintaining adequate heating due to financial constraints. Additionally, 21% of participants reported feeling hungry more frequently, indicating the impact of financial limitations on access to sufficient food. 5% of young people reported that their households had used a Food Bank or received a Food Parcel in the past year, while 18% were unsure. This may indicate ongoing stigma of relying on external assistance to meet basic nutritional needs, as other statistics would indicate higher levels of Food Bank usage (e.g. Trussell Trust). Furthermore, 14% of respondents admitted to skipping meals due to financial constraints, reflecting the extent of food insecurity among young people.

A significant proportion of participants (19%) stated that they had experienced difficulty concentrating in school due to hunger or worries about money for food. This finding underscores the potential educational consequences of financial hardship, which may hinder learning, outcomes, and overall well-being. The research also revealed that 24% of young people had to decline trips or social activities in the past year due to financial constraints. This suggests that the cost-of-living crisis not only affects basic needs but also limits social participation and opportunities for young people, which affects their mental and physical health.

The Government Response in NI

The period in which our Youth Advisory Group conducted their research was extremely challenging, with no Executive or Assembly, and a Budget for Northern Ireland that led to a series of funding cuts. In March 2023, the Department of Education announced that the Executive's primary initiative to tackle so-called 'holiday hunger' - the School Holiday Food Grant - would cease entirely. This decision was made in the absence of Ministers, with no sitting Assembly, and without consulting children or families that would be affected. We provided some

young people involved in our holiday programmes with feedback forms to gather their views and comments on the impact that losing the grant would have. They wrote:

- 'The decision to cut this financial support can impact children/young people/families as the reason they were on free school meals was because they couldn't afford to buy or make lunch while in school. This decision will impact the people of the community as families will not have enough money to afford food therefore meaning they will skip meals and parents may not eat anything which is not healthy';
- 'Some families may struggle to afford to maintain the food habits that their children have been previously introduced to, due to some jobs not working over the holidays, some parents may not be earning income. Also due to the recent cost of living crisis, this may become increasingly harder for parents to keep up';
- 'It will affect how people function as they will be really hungry'; and
- 'Less of everything again which is causing more stress to young people again.'

Previous research by CiNI is also highlighted in the [Department of Education's Equality and Human Rights Policy Screening of the discontinuation of the School Holiday Food Grant payment scheme](#) at the end of 2022/23 financial year, which notes that school holidays are particularly challenging for families experiencing food insecurity. In this screening document, the Department outline a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence that demonstrates the cessation of the Food Grant:

"[...] could have a detrimental impact on families' ability to provide a nutritionally balanced meal each day over the school holidays. This could have a damaging impact upon a child's diet and overall health. Research shows that having a healthy diet can have a critical role in a child's cognitive development and their ability to learn. Without the provision of nutritious food over school holidays this could impact on the child's ability to close the performance gap and reduce inequality. The benefits of a healthy diet are well known and can not only help maintain a healthy weight but can reduce the risk of tooth decay, chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease and some cancers. It can also help improve the mental wellbeing of children and young people by increasing self-esteem and improving mood. 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."

The Department's screening analysis also shows that the removal of financial support through the School Holiday Food Grant will negatively impact disabled, black, and traveller children and young people significantly more than is the case for all pupils. This adds to the cumulative disadvantage faced by these groups of children, which should not only be reflected in policy screening processes but should also inform decision-making around how to prioritise limited resources.

Since Easter 2023, when the School Holiday Food Grant scheme ended, **Northern Ireland has been the only region in the UK that does not provide any government funding towards tackling child food insecurity when children are not in school.** [The Holiday Activities and Food Programme \(HAF\)](#) has been operating in England since 2018, and in October 2021 the UK government announced a £200 million funding commitment until 2025. The HAF programme is a direct response to the research and evidence that shows children from low income backgrounds are less likely to access organised out-of-school activities, more likely to experience 'unhealthy holidays' in terms of nutrition and physical health, and more likely to experience social isolation. The funding to deliver HAF is for the 153 upper tier local authorities in England to coordinate and provide free holiday provision, including healthy food and enriching activities.

In Wales, ['Food and Fun'](#) is a school-based education programme that provides food and nutrition education, physical activity, enrichment sessions and healthy meals to children during the school summer holidays. Starting as a pilot run by Cardiff Council in 2015, Food and Fun has developed into a national, fully funded Welsh Government programme administered by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). In 2023, 175 schools delivered the programme and provided over 11,150 places for children each day that it ran. Similarly in Scotland, the government have provided additional resources to local authorities to deliver activities and food programmes targeted at those in need. An independent evaluation of the [Summer holiday food, activities and childcare programme](#) in 2023 found evidence of consistent access to healthy food during the holidays, improved relationships with food, increased participation in activities outdoors and increased physical activity, access to peer learning/further support, improved health and wellbeing, and opportunities to socialise with peers.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance have been engaging extensively with Ministers and government departments to discuss a holiday food and activity pilot programme. They are proposing an initial €1 million investment as part of the Budget in 2025 to [develop and fund a pilot initiative](#) for the expansion of school meals during holiday time by leveraging existing community infrastructure, and relationships between schools and summer camps. The Irish Government's Food Poverty Working Group, chaired by Minister Joe O'Brien TD, is the primary mechanism to drive cross government action on food poverty. According to the Alliance, the group has mapped out the resources

available to address food poverty, including government programmes, supports, and services. Alongside the Working Group there has been significant progress in expanding the reach of the school meals programme and in particular the gradual roll-out of universal provision of a hot school meal.

The decision by the Irish Government to move towards universal provision of Free School Meals is also significant and **leaves Northern Ireland as the only region across the islands where no form of universal provision exists**. Free School Meals have been provided to all children in reception, Year 1 and Year 2 in England since 2014. In Wales, the government have been gradually expanding Free School Meals to all children in Primary School and expect this provision to be in place by September 2024. In Scotland, the roll-out of universal Free School Meals to all Primary School pupils has been stalled by budgetary constraints and they are currently available for all children up to Primary 5. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland have conducted a review of eligibility for Free School Meals, and engaged with key stakeholders such as CiNI, but decided to delay a public consultation on options for widening access until the Executive was restored and a Minister was appointed.

Key Questions for Ministers and Departments

Correspondence from the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education, Dr Mark Browne, in July 2023, indicated that 'since July 2020 additional ringfenced funding has been provided to enable DE to deliver [the School Holiday Food Grant] on behalf of the Executive. The previous Minister of Education had approved the SHFG scheme up to the end of March 2023. From April 2023 this additional ringfenced funding ended.' The Permanent Secretary also explained that, 'in the absence of further ring-fenced funding being allocated to the department for this specific purpose, [he] had no choice but to take the extremely difficult decision that these payments must cease.'

Given that the HAF programme commitment of £200 million until 2025 announced by the UK government inevitably resulted in Barnett Consequential for Northern Ireland, there are a number of questions as to how and why the funding for the School Holiday Food Grant was managed, whether the Executive relied too heavily on short-term accounting to facilitate this support, why Ministers and officials failed to develop a long-term, sustainable funding strategy, and why the 'ring-fenced funding' suddenly stopped in April 2023 as described by the Permanent Secretary.

Looking ahead, the Executive will need to carefully consider how it intends to address child food insecurity in Northern Ireland with the resources that it has available. This should form part of the detailed action plan, target setting, and

monitoring of the new cross-departmental Anti-Poverty Strategy. Funding for holiday food and activity programmes, reinstating the School Holiday Food Grant, and widening access to Free School Meals are all important levers that have a significant positive impact on children and help mitigate the worst effects of growing up in poverty. The key question is, will Ministers allow NI and its future generations to be left behind as other governments move forward with serious efforts to tackle inequalities? Or when can our children and families expect these vital supports to become a reality.