



Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster University

**Response to: Call for Evidence - Education
(Holiday Meal Payments) Bill**

**Issued by: Northern Ireland Assembly Committee
for Education
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1. Introduction

1.1 This is a joint response made by the Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University following a joint research paper entitled 'Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland'¹ published in June 2023.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.² The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Social Justice Institute at Ulster University brings together academics and others with expertise to collaborate on world-leading research on social justice. We combine traditional legal research with ground-breaking interdisciplinary methods to tackle entrenched problems of poverty, access to justice, human trafficking, immigration and asylum. We work in partnership with individuals, communities and organisations directly connected to the problems of social injustice, to develop research and policy that advances the principles of dignity, respect, empowerment,

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² Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

human rights and sustainability. Uniquely, our research connects to our multi-award-winning Law Clinic where our postgraduate Law students offer free legal advice and representation to the public, and to our Legal Innovation Centre, which creates a participatory approach to public legal education.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University appreciate the opportunity to respond to Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education's Call for Evidence on the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill. We know from our joint research with local women on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis³ how much food insecurity impacts on the lives of women and families. Cuts to education support for disadvantaged pupils⁴ and sustained increases in the price of essentials such as energy, fuel and food have intensified levels of food insecurity. **A key priority from our joint research with 250 local women on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on their lives was to urgently reinstate the Holiday Hunger Scheme to mitigate against food insecurity for women and children. We therefore strongly support the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill.**

1.5 While we strongly support the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill we see this as a reparative measure to reinstate support for disadvantaged children which was cut in 2023 by the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Education. It should form part of a range of anti-poverty measures which are urgently needed to address child poverty and socio-economic driven education deprivation in Northern Ireland. We believe that this should include the provision of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) to all pupils.

1.6 In responding to this call for evidence the Women's Regional Consortium has used evidence from direct engagement with women through focus group sessions

³ Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium, June 2023
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

⁴ Ciara Fitzpatrick, Rebecca Loader, Suzanne McCartney, Barbara McConnell, John McMullen, Colin Murray, Karen Orr, Noel Purdy and Victoria Simms, The Consequences of Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, June 2023
<https://www.stran.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/The-Consequences-of-the-Cuts-to-Education-for-Children-and-Young-People-in-Northern-Ireland-Final.pdf>

and individual interviews. **We wish to stress to the Committee the importance of the valuable lived experience included in this response which must inform the development and implementation of this Bill.** We encourage the Committee and the NI Assembly to not only listen but to take action on this lived experience feedback – see specifically our answer to Question 10.

2.0 General Information

We wish to highlight the following information which we believe must be taken into consideration when consulting on the need for legislation to financially support families during school holidays. The wider environment of rising costs for the essentials (especially food inflation) and cuts to funding has undoubtedly had an impact on household finances and the ability of families to pay their bills. The latest Consumer Council NI Household Expenditure Tracker shows that the lowest income households are spending 24.1% of all basic spending on food and non-alcoholic beverages – which is the highest level since monitoring began.⁵ For the lowest earning households, their low income from wages and/or benefits makes them especially vulnerable to unexpected price rises, unforeseen expenses and the rising cost of living. This situation is expected to worsen. The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) has revised its UK food inflation forecast to over 9% by the end of 2026, driven largely by energy and supply-chain shocks linked to the conflict in the Middle East. This is up from its previous forecast of 3% in January 2025.⁶

Food inflation is a significant concern for women as research shows that women are twice as likely to have the responsibility for cooking, preparing and shopping for food than men.⁷ Pressure for women increases in the summer as FSM entitled children are unable to access a hot meal.

⁵ Consumer Council NI, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker, Quarter 4 2025 (October-December 2025)

<https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/research/featured-research/northern-ireland-household-expenditure-tracker>

⁶ House of Commons Library, Economic update: How resilient are current supply chains? (April 2026)

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10650/>

⁷ <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-and-you-wave5-northern-ireland-report.pdf>

2.1 Poverty & Financial Hardship in Northern Ireland

Latest poverty statistics for Northern Ireland show that 12% of people were considered to be in relative and absolute poverty Before Housing Costs (232,000 people). 15% of children were considered to be in relative and absolute poverty Before Housing Costs (67,000 children). Children have the highest poverty rate of all the population subgroups. The longer-term trend shows that children are at a higher risk of living in poverty than the overall Northern Ireland population.⁸

Women are generally more likely than men to live in poverty across their lifetimes and lone parents are even more vulnerable to poverty (Census figures show that 93% of lone parents are women).

A Northern Ireland Audit Office report into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland⁹ found there has been little sustained improvement in child poverty levels since 2016 and that this means that these children are more likely to have poorer health, educational and wellbeing outcomes than their more well-off peers. It also stated that child poverty brings a considerable cost to the public purse, with the estimated annual cost of child poverty between £825 million and £1 billion annually. According to the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor General, *“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.”*¹⁰

An ARK research paper¹¹ found that around 25% of households in Northern Ireland could not afford to pay an unexpected £500 bill and just over 24% of households reported having to turn the heating down or off due to costs (over half (52.1%) of respondents who described themselves as low income had turned the heating down

⁸ Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2024/25, NISRA & Dept for Communities, March 2026

https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2425.html#

⁹ Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, NI Audit Office, March 2024

<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ The Other Division in Northern Ireland: public attitudes to poverty, economic hardship and social security, ARK Research Update, May 2022

<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2022-05/update146.pdf>

or off because they could not afford it). Respondents who reported financial hardship were asked to identify how they have been coping and 44.6% reported borrowing from friends and family and 26.6% reported increasing credit card debt.

The ARK research paper also found that almost half (49.3%) of respondents agreed that it was the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high and low incomes. It found that 61.7% of respondents disagreed (24.4% strongly disagreed) that the Northern Ireland Executive is doing all that it can to reduce poverty.

The Expert Advisory Panel report for a NI Anti-Poverty Strategy advocated for removing the barriers to educational experience by ensuring that participation in school is cost-free. The report recommended that *“Family outgoings can be reduced by ensuring that participation in school is cost-free, by extending free school meals provision to include school holidays, by expanding funding for the provision of breakfast and homework clubs, and by expanding Sure Start provision.”*

There is substantial research that links poverty with poor educational and health outcomes. A Northern Ireland Audit Office report into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland¹² stated: *“Growing up in poverty can have a significant impact on health, education and economic outcomes. Evidence shows that the gap in attainment between children growing up in poverty and their peers starts early and lasts throughout school. By the time they reach primary school, children from low-income families are already up to a year behind middle income children in terms of cognitive skills. The relationship between health and income levels is also well established. Research has shown that childhood poverty is linked to higher levels of infant mortality and death in early adulthood, as well as poorer mental health, obesity and chronic illness. Children growing up poor are also more likely to continue to experience poverty in adulthood, and so it is important to break the cycle at as early a stage as possible.”*

¹² Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, NI Audit Office, March 2024
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

2.2 Women, Poverty and the Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis

Women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to be providing care either for children or other family members which limits their ability to carry out paid work and more likely to have to make up for cuts to public services through unpaid work. All these factors contribute to keeping women's incomes generally lower over their lifetimes and therefore puts them at greater risk of living on a low-income and in poverty.

Women often bear the brunt of poverty in the home managing household budgets to shield their children from its worst effects. This means that women end up acting as the 'shock absorbers' of poverty going without food, heat or clothes in order to meet the needs of children and/or other family members when money is tight.¹³ These actions taken by women are often unseen within the home and given little attention or focus in terms of policy.

The Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University carried out detailed research with 250 women in Northern Ireland on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on their lives and families.¹⁴ **One of the major findings of this research was food insecurity. The key findings from the research were:**

- 75% of the women said they were having the most difficulty paying for their food shopping
- 89% said the price increases which had the biggest impact on their household budget were food bills and 90% said energy bills.
- 56% were in debt and of these 82% said they had to borrow as a result of cost of living increases.

¹³ A Female Face, Fabian Society Blog by Mary-Ann Stephenson, Women's Budget Group, February 2019

<https://fabians.org.uk/a-female-face/>

¹⁴ Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium, June 2023

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>; See also, Ciara Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Chapman and Siobhán Harding, Social policy in a political vacuum: Women's experiences of hunger during the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland (2025). *Social Policy & Administration*, 59(2), 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.13063>

- 90% felt that the Cost-of-Living Crisis had impacted on their physical or mental health or both.
- Of those who had children, 78% felt that cost of living increases had negatively impacted on their children.
- 78% of the women said they felt cold or hungry or both as a result of cost of living increases.
- 43% of the women reported skipping meals to try and cope with rising prices to ensure that their children and families were fed.
- 41% needed to use a foodbank/other charitable support due to increases in the cost of living.

“I can’t go to the butchers for meat it’s too expensive. I have to go to the supermarket and look for yellow stickers.”

“In our local shop it is £1.95 for milk – you used to be able to get 2 for £2. I go through a thing of milk and a loaf of bread a day with the kids.”

“The weekly shop has gone up, it’s not 1p or 2p it’s 20p/30p sometimes 50p an item.”

“The price of bread I genuinely can’t get over it! I would usually try and buy the own brand bread but they don’t always have it.”

“You notice now it’s not just a couple of pence that things have went up its way more than that. You used to be able to get six bread rolls for £1 now you’re getting 4 for £1.50 for exactly the same rolls. Toilet rolls are the same, it’s unbelievable.”

“They need to provide free school dinners for all children. I can’t keep up to £2.70 a day for my two kids all week.”

“My kids go to Breakfast Club in school and that’s a godsend. If I didn’t have that I don’t know what I’d do. There are times I’ve went three or four days with very little to eat, maybe I’d grab an apple just so I have something in my stomach and I’m not going to bed with hunger pains and growling in my stomach.”

“I am now scraping along to provide food and keep a roof over mine and my child’s heads. The cost to survive is atrocious.”

“Women are the ones who often give up/do without to absorb debt rather than let it impact on their children. I’ll do without spuds and put the spud on the child’s plate. Women are at the frontline of this.”

“Women normally run the house and do the grocery shopping. I’m the one buying the kids their clothes and managing the finances. You take on the financial impact of it and the constant thinking about it.”

“I don’t think anyone recognises the impact of this Crisis on women especially. We have a high level of responsibility and it’s impacting really badly and Government are not taking enough notice. People are suicidal and feel like a failure. I’m lying in bed at night and getting really bad intrusive thoughts to the point where I look at my daughter and think if something happens to me who will look after her? I asked the person in charge in my hostel to ring me in the morning and check if I’m OK. It’s really, really impacting on people and Government need to be more aware of the impacts of this Crisis.”

“Sometimes you struggle between turning the heating on and feeding the children. As a mother you’d go without to make sure the kids have what they need. I’ve made dinner sometimes and there hasn’t been enough for everyone so I’ve lied and said it’s alright I’ve eaten so that I can try and make it stretch.”

(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, June 2023)

2.3 Impact of Education Cuts

The Department for Education announced that the Holiday Hunger Scheme would no longer provide support to families (approx. 96,300) entitled to Free School Meals¹⁵ during holiday periods (£27 per child, every two weeks). This scheme was set up with cross-party support during the pandemic and pioneered a cash-first approach to provide families with extra support during a crisis. It was appropriately administered by the Department for Education/Education Authority, who are responsible for the delivery of FSM provision. Research by Spyreli et al (2021) which studied the impact of Covid-19 on the food decisions of economically disadvantaged families in NI found that the Holiday Hunger Scheme, together with informal support offered through social circles was crucial for parents, particularly lone parents who needed to reduce costs and feed their family with a limited budget.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Extended

¹⁵ The threshold for entitlement for Free School Meals (FSM) is extremely low at £7,400 per year (after tax and not including benefits)

¹⁶ A qualitative exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on food decisions of economically disadvantaged families in Northern Ireland, BMC Public Health, December 2021

Schools Programme' which provides support to schools in disadvantaged areas to put in place activities to support children's learning (which included schools running Breakfast Clubs) has also been subject to budget cuts since 2023.

Research has shown that hunger and long-term poverty relate directly to poor educational attainment.¹⁷ This is why access to food has formed a significant plank of other UK countries approach to tackling child poverty. For example, Labour has rolled out Breakfast clubs nationally, recognising the benefits a meal to begin the day. They will also extend FSM to all households to those entitled to UC. This provision has not been extended to children in NI and creating new spatial inequalities for children.

2.4 Concerns about Food Insecurity

The impacts of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on the cost of food have been well documented and many low-income families are struggling to afford the essentials including food. Research by the Consumer Council¹⁸ shows a range of concerning issues around the cost of food:

- Around 2 in 5 (42%) of respondents felt their household was worse off when compared to 12 months ago.
- Nine in ten (90%) attributed this to an increase in the cost of food and groceries.
- When compared to 12 months ago, about seven in ten (71%) respondents were spending more on food and groceries.
- Food prices (93%) were a concern for the overwhelming majority of respondents.

Increasing foodbank use has pointed to growing concerns about the levels of food insecurity in Northern Ireland. Food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland provided 68,000 emergency food parcels in 2025. The level of emergency

[A qualitative exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on food decisions of economically disadvantaged families in Northern Ireland | BMC Public Health | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](#)

¹⁷ COSMO initial findings (May 2023) <https://cosmostudy.uk/latest/new-research-reveals-worrying-links-between-poverty-mental-health-and-gcse-grades>

¹⁸ NI Consumers and the Cost of Living – Pulse Survey, Consumer Council, March 2026 <https://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/research/northern-ireland-consumers-and-cost-living-pulse-survey-march-2026>

food provision seen across food banks in the Trussell community in 2025 remains well above pre-pandemic levels. The number of parcels distributed in 2025 was 60% higher than the number distributed in the pre-pandemic year of 2019. In 2025, over 26,000 parcels were distributed for children by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland, an increase of nearly 9,000 parcels since 2019. This marks a 49% increase since 2019, and is the sixth year in succession that the number of parcels provided for children has been above 25,000.¹⁹

It is important to note how the affordability of food links in with Government guidance on a healthy diet. On average, healthier foods are more than twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods. The price gap between healthier and less healthy food is now the widest it has been in over a decade, with a 27% increase in the price gap between healthier and less healthy food from 2015 to 2025.²⁰ Research by the Food Foundation found that households with children in the lowest income quintile would need to spend 85% of their disposable income on food to afford the Eatwell Guide (the official UK government model used to define a healthy, balanced diet).²¹

Predictions for food inflation in the future also give cause for concern. As reported by the Food Foundation²² a study by BravoVoucher predicts that the cost of everyday food items is set to surge by 2030, with staple products like olive oil expected to reach between £9.05 and £17 per bottle. Olive oil has already experienced the largest price increase, soaring by 113.8% between 2019 and 2024. Baked beans have also seen a significant rise, with prices climbing by 70.5% during the same period, potentially costing around £1.77 per tin by 2030. Vegetables are also of concern. For example, broccoli which is currently averaging £2.50 per kg, could rise to £3.32 per kg by 2030 if inflation rates remain steady, or £2.82 if economic conditions improve according to the study. Other common household items, such as semi-skimmed milk, whole chicken, and powdered baby formula, are also expected to see significant price increases by 2030.

¹⁹ Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland, Trussell NI, March 2026
https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/eys_factsheet_ni_2025.pdf

²⁰ The Broken Plate 2026, Food Foundation
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/broken-plate-2026>

²¹ Ibid

²² <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/food-prices-tracker-august-2024>

The impact of the war in Iran and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is driving up global food prices due to the increasing costs of fuel, shipping and fertiliser. The National Farmers' Union has warned that food prices in the UK are likely to go up as a result of the conflict in the Middle East.²³ Analysis from the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) shows that the economic aftershocks of the Iran war are likely to widen inequalities, with poorer UK households affected more acutely than richer households.²⁴

Given the trajectory of price rises for food, particularly healthy food, there is a real need to supplement the incomes of low-income children and families to ensure that they can afford healthy, nutritious food.

“I spend £20 on fruit and it only lasts a couple of days. I have twins and £20 does not give me enough fruit for them, they love fruit. You can go to McDonalds and get a Happy Meal for £2.19 and there’s a wee bit of fruit in it. No matter what fruit should you go to get you’re spending £20/£30 it’s crazy.”

“You can go to Iceland and get a full trolley of junk food – processed chicken nuggets, waffles, junk like that. I love cooking fresh – fruit and vegetables, fish and now you can’t afford it. It’s so much harder now to give the kids that fresh stuff. It’s £4 for two bits of salmon and my son could eat that on his own.”

“Fruit and vegetables are really expensive. You can run into Iceland and grab pizzas for cheaper. You’re forced to buy more unhealthy food.”

(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, June 2023)

“The Cost of Living Crisis is a big worry. The food shop is definitely more expensive. You can really see the difference in your weekly shop it’s going higher and higher and higher. And there’s less in it. It’s got worse rather than better. Some things might have dropped a wee bit but the main staples like meat and things like that have gone through the roof.”

“Inflation is coming down but it’s not being reflected in your shopping trolley.”

(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on Mental Health Matters for Women, May 2026)

²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy413ke31d8o>

²⁴ <https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/food-inflation-from-iran-war-could-hit-poorer-households-50-harder-than-richest>

2.5 Devolution and Access to Free School Meals in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland now lags significantly behind the UK and Republic of Ireland in terms of Free School Meals (FSM) provision. It is the only country in the UK which does not provide any universal provision. England provides Universal FSM (UFSM) to pre-school age children, p.1 and p.2 pupils. In Scotland, all children to p.5 are entitled to a UFSM with an expansion of FSM to those families who are in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment. In Wales, all primary school children (p.1 – p.7) are entitled to a UFSM, with plans to extend FSM to secondary school pupils where there is entitlement to UC.²⁵ The provision of UFSM throughout the school year arguably provides parents with more financial bandwidth to deal with any financial shocks that may be experienced during the summer. During the summer months, the Government in Westminster funds the Holiday Activities and Food programme, which is run by local authorities in England. A similar programme is available to FSM entitled children in Scotland and the Scottish Government provides holiday meal support for eligible families through direct payments (usually around £2.50 per day, per child).

It is noteworthy that an evaluation of the school meals programme in the Republic of Ireland has recommended that there should be a Universal School Meals Programme, with one free hot meal for every child in Ireland.²⁶ This follows the establishment of a European Child Guarantee with the objective to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access of children in need to a set of key services including healthy nutrition. The EU Child Guarantee states that Member States should ensure that every child in need gets effective access to at least one healthy meal each school day.²⁷ Since 2025 the Republic of Ireland have introduced a free hot meal for every child in primary school.

²⁵ For a full outline of the devolved differences in FSM entitlement please see, Ciara Fitzpatrick, Maddy Power, Kate Andersen, Tom Lee, Uisce Jordan, Annie Irvine, Mhairi-Jean Ross, Katy Gillespie and Ruth Patrick, 'Beggars Can't Be Choosers': How Devolution Shapes Access to Free School Meals, Social Policy Review 38 (Forthcoming, July 2026).

²⁶ Evaluation of the School Meals Programme, Department of Social Protection, December 2022 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/251427/6b3e8499-4cca-4f32-aa7d-cbcad0b660e2.pdf#page=null>

²⁷ Paragraph 23, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC

A briefing paper by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)²⁸ outlines concern about the adequacy of current FSM eligibility criteria as an effective method for targeting the provision of FSM and uniform grants at children in poverty. The paper outlines that entitlement to FSM is a very poor indicator of a child being in poverty in Northern Ireland with two in five (41%) of families in poverty not eligible for FSM between 2017 and 2020. The paper states that it is clear that the current eligibility criteria are inadequate. It demonstrates that increasing income thresholds using the other current criteria only marginally increases the proportion of children in poverty eligible for FSM - from 59% at an income threshold of £14,000, to 62% when the income threshold is raised to £17,000. The majority of children who become eligible for FSM through increasing the income threshold are not in poverty.

NICCY recommends that FSM should be provided on a universal basis, starting with younger children in the first instance, to ensure that all children receive at least one nutritious meal a day while at school, and to overcome the stigma associated with FSM. This should be expanded to older children as budget allows. NICCY also call for the requirement for families to be in receipt of state benefits to be removed as a criteria for FSM. They call for eligibility to be based solely on income levels, equivalised by family size stating it is not adequate to increase the number of children able to access FSM solely by increasing income thresholds in the eligibility criteria, as this will only marginally increase the number children in poverty accessing FSM.

The research supports the introduction of expanded access to Universal Free School Meals for all children. There is strong consensus for this approach in the responses to the Department’s own consultation on Free School Meals (2024). The research also emphasises the importance of access to food during the summer months to enhance children’s diet, well-being, health and educational outcomes.

²⁸ Briefing on Free Schools Meals Eligibility in Northern Ireland, NICCY, February 2025
<https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/NICCY-Briefing-on-FSM-Analysis-January-2025.pdf>

3.0 Consultation Questions

1. How would you like your response to be published?

- I would like my response to be published
- I would like to request my response not be published, and I understand this will only be accepted in exceptional circumstances

2. Are you content that any of your suggestions which have been published to the Committee or the Assembly may inspire the text of an amendment?

- Yes
- No

3. What is your name?

Siobhán Harding & Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick

4. What is your email address?

Siobhán Harding – policy@wsn.org.uk

Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick – c.fitzpatrick@ulster.ac.uk

5. Please indicate if you are providing a submission:

- As an individual
- On behalf of an organisation or business

If on behalf of an organisation or business, please state its name:

Joint submission on behalf of the Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster University,
Social Justice Institute

And please tell us briefly how the organisation or business relates to the subject matter of the Bill:

We are submitting a response following the publication of extensive research with women on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis which found significant impacts arising from the increased costs of food. In addition, ongoing research by both the Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University continues to highlight how cuts to public funding particularly in education and the impacts of financial hardship and poverty continue to impact on the lives of many women, children and families in Northern Ireland. Our research emphasises that overwhelming pressure falls on women who are most likely to be responsible for purchasing and preparing food for the household.

6. Do you agree with the policy objectives of the Bill?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please elaborate:

We believe that this Bill will help to address the issue of 'holiday hunger' by ensuring that children who are entitled to receive free school meals will continue to receive support to help alleviate food poverty during school holiday periods. This Bill will reinstate essential support that was removed in 2023 without the benefit of political accountability and scrutiny. Politicians in Northern Ireland, led the way, by introducing a direct payment to FSM entitlement during the Covid-19 pandemic. This provision continued to support families as the Cost-of-Living hit Northern Ireland in 2021.

When it was cut in 2023, the then Permanent Secretary Dr Mark Browne said, “*cutting holiday hunger provision was the most difficult decision.*”²⁹

School holidays are particularly difficult for low-income families. They are no longer able to avail of a free school meal during holiday periods increasing the financial burden on these families who are already living on impossibly tight household budgets. During holiday periods the cost of feeding a family increases significantly at the same time as a range of other costs including childcare, school holiday activities, school uniforms and shoes.

These increasing costs lead to a variety of negative outcomes for women, children and families. Parents end up skipping meals themselves or living on cereal or toast so their children can have decent meals. Families end up having to buy cheaper, processed, less nutritious food because they can't afford healthy food and many families end up having to use food banks and charitable support so they are able to make ends meet.

We believe that making these payments would help to ensure that families are better able to provide healthy, nutritious food for their children during the holidays which has positive impacts for their health, wellbeing and learning. As outlined above, the NI Executive must prioritise addressing Child Poverty in order to provide better long-term outcomes as they transition into adulthood.

Our joint research with women in Northern Ireland on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis³⁰ highlights significant levels of food insecurity. The research found that 91% of the women said they had difficulty paying their bills as a result of cost-of-living increases. 75% reported that they were having the most difficulty paying for their food shopping. 89% reported that the price increases having the biggest impact on their household budget were food bills. **A key priority from this research was to urgently reinstate the Holiday Hunger Scheme to mitigate against food insecurity for women and children.**

The results of a consultation on the proposed Bill showed high levels of support for the Bill.³¹ The consultation summary noted high levels of support for the previous School Holiday Food Grant Scheme (87%) and noted high levels of agreement amongst respondents in the following areas:

²⁹ Robbie Meredith, Cutting Holiday Hunger money most difficult decision, says civil servant <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66003322>

³⁰ Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium, June 2023 <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

³¹ <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fsinnfein.ie%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2025%2F05%2FHoliday-Hunger-PMB-Consultation-Summary-of-Responses.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

- Free school meal support over school holidays would alleviate some financial pressure experienced by low-income families (98%)
- Greater food security would have a positive impact on the physical and mental health of children and young people (99%); and
- Legislation should be developed to address holiday hunger by ensuring that children and young people who are eligible for Free School Meals should have this entitlement, or payment in lieu of this entitlement, extended to cover school holiday periods (96%).
- Of those respondents who agreed with the proposed scheme to provide payments in lieu of Free School Meals during the school holidays, the majority (77%) thought that payments should be made on a weekly basis.

7. Do you think the provisions of the Bill will be effective in achieving the policy objectives?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please elaborate:

Yes, the provisions of the Bill will put in place the statutory framework to provide FSM meal entitled families with cash-transfers during the summer months to mitigate against the impact of child poverty. The Education Authority which is responsible for administering FSM payments to entitled households is the most appropriate public body to deliver this payment.

8. Please note which (if any) of these objectives you consider to be ineffective. List the objectives you feel are ineffective and why.

N/A

9. Do you foresee any unintended consequences of any of the policy objectives of the Bill?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please elaborate:

In July 2020 the Department of Education introduced the School Holiday Food Grant scheme which provided a fortnightly payment of £27 per child directly to the parents of children who were entitled to Free School Meals. The Bill proposes a similar process to this and a consultation exercise on the proposed Bill showed high levels of support. Given that these payments have been made to eligible households before and were successful we do not foresee any unintended consequences of any of the policy objectives of the Bill.

10. Do you agree to the introduction of a requirement for the Authority to provide a financial payment in lieu of milk, meals or other refreshment for relevant periods, with the requirement applicable to parents of pupils in receipt of free school meals

Yes

No

Other

Please explain your answer:

We strongly support the introduction of this Bill to make payments in lieu of Free School Meals to eligible pupils during school holidays. However, we would like to see this as just the start of a range of measures to tackle poverty and improve socio-economic driven educational inequalities. Ultimately, we support the introduction of UFMS which helps address poverty and educational attainment levels by ensuring every child has access to a nutritious meal during the school day. Universal provision removes the stigma around Free School Meals and would help to ensure

that children are not hungry and therefore are more able to learn and participate fully in school.

We strongly support a cash-first approach for these payments. This gives families dignity and choice in relation to buying food for their children. As outlined in the report on the impact of cuts to education and the consequences for children and young people in Northern Ireland³² *“NI arguably led the way by implementing a NI wide cash-first approach which provided families with the dignity of choice and control (Patrick et al, 2021).”*

We wish to highlight the following case study from the BBC showing the impact of the loss of the School Holiday Food Grant in 2023. Kayleigh Martin had been receiving payments through the School Holiday Food Grant for her four-year old son Karló who has special educational needs.³³

“It was a great help when you were getting it because you weren’t having to worry as much, but now you have to plan everything right down to the penny really.”

“The cost of bread, milk, pancakes, yoghurts - those kind of things - that’s all gone up in price.”

She said every single day was a challenge with *“very little support out there”*.

“You try and try and try every day and you just feel like you’re banging your head against a brick wall.”

We also include this case study from Sarah (not her real name) and some quotes from women who took part in a focus group discussion on this issue which highlights the pressures that women face in relation to the rising cost of food, the impact on their children and which provide important evidence to support the need for these payments:

³² An updated perspective on the Cuts to Education and the Consequences for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, November 2024

https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/214699254/A_response_to_the_Northern_Ireland_Programme_for_Government_Nov_2024.pdf

³³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66399979>

“My name is Sarah and I have one son aged six who gets Free School Meals. He is a huge fan of healthy food and milk! He loves his fruit and vegetables. He was brought up eating healthy foods but it’s costly. Affording food, especially fresh, healthy food is a big difficulty for me. Even with going to the social supermarket and using an App to access free surplus food from supermarkets it’s still not even covering enough.

I bought a punnet of strawberries the other day – it was yellow sticker so cost me £1.50 and it was nearly gone by the time we got home, I only got 2 of them! The punnet I got was half price. I’m only able to afford strawberries if they are half price. I get bananas sometimes through the App and make my own smoothies for him with those. I find strawberries and berries in general to be very expensive. Even apples have gone up. I bought apples to make apple sauce and I only got 2 containers out of it and he’ll have gone through that in no time. I’m always looking for things that are reduced or free on the App.

I can’t think of anything that hasn’t increased in price. Eggs have gone up a lot – it has been £3.45 for half a dozen eggs sometimes and my son loves eggs. And cereal is so expensive – it was £5.50 for 48 Weetabix the last time I checked and I couldn’t afford to buy them.

The cost of food does limit what I can buy for my son at times. He is not a huge red meat eater but I will buy mince sometimes and it is really expensive – most of the time I don’t buy it because of the cost. Fish has always been really expensive and he loves fish.

My son mostly loves the Free School Meals and he eats well at school. I really notice a difference over the holidays – I usually have to consider getting a foodbank referral over the summer. I did last summer to help us out. My son is at home and eating more so I have to look for other kinds of assistance for that.

I think it would be amazing if they brought back the Holiday Hunger payments. That would be of great benefit to me and to those who really feel a stigma around going to a foodbank and those who end up going without. It wasn’t easy for me going to a foodbank and explaining why I was going in and why I was in dire need, it’s not an easy choice to make.

It would definitely help me out if they brought back these payments – it would buy my son so much – it would be great. Cash would give me more options, it just gives more choice having cash and then you can shop around better for good deals and get what you want.

I do have to sacrifice what I can eat without a doubt. I buy fruit and let my son eat it all. If I’m looking stuff for myself I look for things which are on a deal to justify having it but that’s only an occasional thing normally I prioritise what he wants.

My son has no idea about the price of food. It’s awful in the shops constantly saying no – telling him he can’t have things because they are too expensive. That takes a toll on me too.”

“Milk has went way up. We go through so much milk. I buy a 2 litre and it’s gone in no time. Milk, fruit and veggies, those things have really gone up. It’s crazy. And protein – meat and ham – things that fill them – it’s a fortune.”

“Strawberries – what is it with the cost of those? And kids love them – they love berries. You want to encourage them to eat them but it can be nearly £5 for a wee box and it’s not even full. They’re so expensive.”

“By the time I buy all the fruit that my daughters eat there’s £25 gone already just on fruit and that wouldn’t even last me the full week – just a few days. If my daughters didn’t like fruit I wouldn’t buy it because it’s too dear.”

“You can get a bag of crisps for 60p versus a small carton of strawberries for £3.”

“My kids love their fruit and that’s great but it’s extortionate. And not only fruit but protein too – you need to fill them. My kids love Greek yoghurt and dairy food but it’s all got really expensive.”

“During school breaks it’s even more of a cost because you’re having to fill in what they aren’t getting at school. When they ran the scheme before it really helped me. I got help from it before. I notice a big difference because I’m missing that extra when they are off. And they eat even more! The costs double when they’re off school. They’re constantly snacking and eating – they’re growing! I notice a big difference when they’re off.”

“It’s a massive difference when they’re off school. Even the weekends it’s “can I have, can I have?” all the time. I’m giving them ice lollies now – in their head that’s a treat but for me it’s cheaper and there’s less sugar in them than some things.”

“Isn’t it really sad that we have to limit what the kids get because of costs especially when they’re asking for healthy things.”

“I wish my son would eat healthy fruit and vegetables but he won’t.” In response from another mother: “No you don’t, it’s so expensive, you have to limit them.”

“My son would eat and eat all the fruit. He’s only 3 and it’s great for him because he’s growing. But I have to say it’s all done, it’s gone because I can only afford so much. It’s mad when you have to limit them especially for the healthy things because it’s so expensive.”

“My oldest is epileptic and on medications that make her more hungry so she’s always wanting more food. What do you do?”

“The cost of protein is a big one, ham, etc. It’s really hard to do it. You buy a packet of ham and there’s 5 slices in it for £3.50 and it lasts no time.”

“It’s all essential stuff we’re talking about. If the kids don’t have it, it will affect their physical growing, their development and their education. It’s not just about the finances for us as mums, it’s affecting their development too.”

“My daughter went and got some milk and bananas for me this morning and they’re all gone, the milk is half gone now too and it will be gone by the end of the day.”

“I shop in Tesco for the sheer fact that you can use the scanners. If I’ve got a budget of £50 at least with the scanner I know I’m not going to go over it. You have to. It’s just so I know what I’m spending. I don’t have any more to spend.”

“I’m always looking out for reduced stuff. In Tesco on a Monday they have reduced things like hummus, fruit and veggies. It’s still a fortune and sometimes it doesn’t last beyond that day. You’re buying it at a cheaper price but it might only last for one day.”

“I have the Gander App it lets you know what shops have discounted food – you know when stuff is getting reduced and in what shops.”

“Some mums don’t drive or have a car so it costs more to get the shopping. That means you’re stuck with local shops that are nearer and more expensive. They don’t think about all the obstacles we have. Strawberries might be £2 in Lidl but it’s 5 miles away from me.”

“If you have a child with an allergy then food is more expensive. Gluten free stuff is so expensive.”

“I’m lactose intolerant and dairy free is more expensive. I just end up buying the regular milk and sitting on the toilet. You end up eating things you shouldn’t be eating because of the cost and they don’t really do offers on it. We have to start my son on gluten free to see if it helps him but I’m dreading the cost.”

“My daughter is gluten free and dairy free – it’s really hard to get food for her and it’s very expensive. You can get a prescription from the GP that gets you bread but it’s not very nice – it’s very basic. If you go to the supermarket you can get gluten free bread that’s nicer and better quality but it’s more expensive. You’re being punished for being allergic to something.”

“I’m having to cut back for myself. I don’t get any of the fruit, I’m lucky if I get a little bit of the Greek yoghurt. I have to go without. You do it for your children but it’s a sacrifice, there’s a lot of sacrifice.”

“If I have a budget of £70 for the weeks shopping I’ll get everything the kids need that will do them for the week. Then I get the rest of the budget. So it depends what they need from that budget what I will get that week. I’m just getting the leftovers – you do it because the kids come first, they need it. If there’s only a fiver left of the budget there’s only a fiver left of the budget for me.”

“When I go to Tesco the first aisle I go to is the reduced aisle – sometimes it’s only reduced a wee bit, it’s not reduced enough. You’re thinking do I just go and get a fresh one that will last me a bit longer.”

“I have skipped meals or just ate the kids leftovers. Or you give yourself a tiny portion.”

“I made spaghetti bolognese and realised there was so little in the pack of mince. I ended up giving the kids the meat and I just had noodles. My daughter started crying and she said to me “Where’s your dinner mummy?” It’s so hard. It’s even harder when the kids notice, she’s 10. I don’t think children should have to see that and be asking their parents where’s your dinner? I was fine with having the noodles, I’ve done it for years but when she noticed and she cried it made me cry. I was trying to hide in the bathroom so she wouldn’t see me cry. I came out and calmed myself and said mummy’s fine look I’ve got noodles it’s fine. She’s very aware.”

“The politicians get their food subsidised and they earn way more than we do! That’s not right – they should be helping to feed the children.”

“I’m on my own, I’ve got no support and two children. I’m working part-time and paying for childcare and getting Universal Credit. You’re in limbo every month because you don’t know what you’ll be getting from Universal Credit you don’t know if you have enough for what you need to get. It would be cheaper for me not to work.”

“I really saw the difference when I was getting the holiday hunger payments before especially for the fruit because they eat so much of it and for the protein too. I like to give them protein, the fruit will not fill them but the protein will.”

“I really noticed the difference when they took the holiday hunger payments away. Not during term time obviously there’s still a struggle having to pay a fortune for fruit during term time but it’s a massive hit to lose these payments in the summer. This summer is coming and I’m thinking what am I going to do? My daughter is going to be off and not getting her lunches and snacks in school and I’m going to have to pay for all of that.”

“All I can think about is that the kids are punished – it’s not fair on the children.”

“They talk about this payment but they don’t realise what it means. All the things kids like to eat, the sensitivities, the intolerances, watching their parents go without – it affects them, it’s like a punishment. Government don’t see all the issues – they don’t have to struggle so they don’t see it.”

“I prefer a cash payment, you’ve got more choice with cash.”

“The cost of food is worse than it was in Covid and they brought in these payments to help with Covid – the payments should be brought back as food is so expensive.”

“Government don’t understand they don’t go through these things, they’re not empathetic to us. They shun you then, they scoff at you, it just makes you

angry. They need to spend a week with us and see what a child eats – understand how not being able to afford things alters their lives.”

“Getting these payments would help us buy more healthy food because we’re really struggling to do that. It wouldn’t make you feel like you’re struggling – you’d have the money there to get what you needed instead of saying I’ve only got £50 – you’d have that bit extra – you could afford that box of strawberries this week.”

“Having this payment would be a bit of a breather – you wouldn’t feel that things were so tight. It’s not going to 100% fix things it would just give you a wee bit of a release so you’re not struggling so much. It would lift the pressure for a wee bit.”

“The cost of food causes a lot of stress. You feel like a bad mum, there’s that guilt in not being able to afford the food you need.”

“It’s even worse with the price of food going up and then you’ve kids in extra curricular things and you have to budget even tighter so they can keep doing them. I couldn’t tell my daughter she couldn’t go to her wee dance class.”

“My daughter is in gymnastics and I’ve tried to get her out of it so many times and get her into something cheaper but she loves it.”

“It’s horrible having to buy cheaper food, you don’t know what’s in it and that can affect the kids health.”

“My daughter is doing the transfer test and she will have to do papers over the summer. I’m worried about what she’s going to be eating. That will affect her – she has to do school work during the summer and I’m wanting her to do well academically. Nutrition is a big part of that. If she’s hungry that’s going to affect her. It will put her down the order versus someone who can eat whatever they want.”

“When your kids are at home they eat far more, you really need the help when they’re off.”

“I know what good nutrition does for them physically and mentally – for everything! It sets them up for their education when they feel full and comfortable – it helps their brain power.”

“My daughter asked me “do you not eat?” I was having something smaller later on and in my eyes I didn’t want them to see that so I was eating later.”

“I’ve done it for years, living on pasta and bits of bread it’s just something I have to do. But my daughter is getting to an age where she’s aware, she’s watching me and that’s really hard.”

“I start cleaning to not make it obvious that I wasn’t eating when there isn’t enough.”

“Bringing these payments in is not that much for the politicians to do for the children of Northern Ireland!”

“It’s not fair why are we so far behind. The politicians are out of touch with how we live.”

(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium focus group discussion on the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill, June 2026)

11. Do you want to make any changes to this clause? If so, what change would you suggest?

Yes

No

Other

Please explain your answer:

N/A

12. Do you agree with the aims of this clause amend definitions of “the relevant periods” and “the model Disposal of Records Schedule”

Yes

No

Other

Please explain your answer:

We agree that the relevant periods should include the Summer, Halloween, Christmas, mid-term and Easter, school holiday periods, (including the summer holiday at the end of a pupil’s final year at school). In the longer term we would like to see an extension of these payments to cover bank holidays and any other school closure dates.

13. Do you want to make any changes to this clause? If so, what change would you suggest?

- Yes
- No
- Other

Please explain your answer:

N/A

14. Do you agree with the aims of this clause?

- Yes
- No
- Other

Please explain your answer:

We agree that the 1986 Order means the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

15. Do you want to propose any changes to this clause? If so, what change would you suggest?

- Yes
- No
- Other

Please explain your answer:

N/A

16. Do you agree that the Bill will come into operation no later than the next relevant period following Royal Assent?

Yes

No

Other

Please explain your answer:

As highlighted by our research on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis there is a great need for help with the costs of food among low-income households. Food price inflation remains high and is not likely to see any reduction given wider world events such as the war in Iran. Therefore, help with the costs of food is urgently needed to prevent hunger, financial hardship and the negative impacts on children's ability to learn and take part in school life.

17. Do you want to make any changes to this clause? If so, what change would you suggest?

Yes

No

Other

Please explain your answer:

N/A