

**Right To Food UK Commission**  
**Submission to the Right to Food Commission**  
**Women's Regional Consortium, Northern Ireland**  
**June 2026**

**About Us**

The Women's Regional Consortium in Northern Ireland 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. 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)

**Why we are submitting to the Call for Evidence**

The Women's Regional Consortium are pleased to contribute to this call for evidence. Our research work with local women over the last number of years continues to highlight significant levels of food insecurity among low-income women. In particular our joint research with Ulster University on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on

women<sup>1</sup> illustrates just how much food insecurity impacts on the lives of women and families. Food insecurity was a critical finding in this research which highlighted that women in low-income households disproportionately act as the "shock absorbers" of poverty routinely skipping meals and going without to shield their children from hardship. Cuts to education support for disadvantaged pupils<sup>2</sup> and sustained increases in the price of essentials particularly food and energy costs have intensified levels of food insecurity in Northern Ireland.

Throughout our research work with local women we have a large evidence base which highlights the impact of food insecurity, food poverty and difficulties meeting the rising cost of food. We have included throughout this response a range of quotes from the women who have taken part in this research to highlight the enormity of this issue and the impact it has on women and their families. The Women's Regional Consortium wishes to highlight the importance of these lived experiences and calls on the Right to Food Commission to take their views and experiences fully into account in the development of a Right to Food Law.

## **Summary of Response**

### **Main Issues:**

- Women are acting as the "shock absorbers" of poverty: Low-income women disproportionately absorb the impact of poverty by routinely skipping meals and going without food or heat to ensure their children and families are fed.
- High Levels of Food Insecurity: Research highlights that 27% of Northern Ireland households experienced low food security in 2023/24, rising to 36% for households with children and 53% for those earning under £19,000. Over half (51%) of families worry their food will run out before they receive more money.

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> 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>

- **Rising Financial Pressures:** Food inflation and energy costs are severely straining budgets. The lowest-income households spend 24.1% of basic expenditure on food. Food inflation is likely to remain high as a result of wider events such as the war in Iran.
- **Wider Impacts:** Inadequate food and financial worry over the costs of essentials have deeply damaged the mental and physical health, social lives and relationships of families, alongside negatively affecting children's emotional wellbeing and concentration.

## **Current Support Mechanisms**

### **What is Working:**

- **Direct Cash Payments:** Schemes like Healthy Start and Holiday Hunger payments provide essential relief particularly for women.
- **Social Supermarkets:** Community initiatives, such as the Social Supermarket at *Footprints Women's Centre*, provide heavily discounted essentials alongside dignified shopping experiences and critical wraparound emotional and financial advice.

### **What's Not Working:**

- **Inadequate Welfare Safety Nets:** Universal Credit rates fail to reflect the actual cost of living. Carer's Allowance remains critically low pushing unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, into poverty.
- **Systemic Gaps in Northern Ireland:** Northern Ireland is the only UK nation without universal Free School Meal (FSM) provision. The removal of the Holiday Hunger Scheme in 2023 further exacerbated poverty during school breaks. Additionally, NI has the lowest uptake of the Healthy Start scheme in the UK at just 52.7%.
- **Barriers to Access:** Stigma, shame, transportation limits and the higher cost of specialist dietary/allergy foods restrict the poorest from accessing proper nutrition.

- Working Poverty: Over half of low-paid jobs in NI are held by women, leaving many working families ineligible for benefits but still unable to afford basic food items.

### **Recommendations for a Right to Food Law:**

- Enforceable Legal Rights: The law must be binding and enforceable—shifting the focus from charitable emergency food banks to a legal obligation that guarantees human dignity and access to nourishing food.
- Income Adequacy: The Right to Food cannot exist without tackling poverty directly. The Women’s Regional Consortium supports an Essentials Guarantee within Universal Credit and a transition to a real Living Wage.
- Policy Action in Northern Ireland: Urgent action is needed to implement Universal Free School Meals, reinstate the Holiday Hunger Scheme cash payments, and increase the value of Healthy Start payments in line with inflation.
- Involvement of Lived Experience is essential: Any future legislation must formally integrate the voices and lived experiences of those facing food insecurity into its ongoing design, monitoring and evaluation.

### **Question 1 - Food Security in Northern Ireland, challenges and solutions that are having a positive impact**

Research by the Consumer Council<sup>3</sup> in Northern Ireland 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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>

- When compared to 12 months ago, about seven in ten (71%) respondents were spending more on food and groceries, 19% were spending about the same amount, whilst 8% were spending less.
- Around a third (34%) had reduced spend on food shopping and spent more time shopping around to find the best deals (33%)
- Food prices (93%) were a concern for the overwhelming majority of respondents.

Research by the Food Standards Agency (FSA)<sup>4</sup> estimates that 27% of households in Northern Ireland experienced low levels of food security in 2023/24. It also found the following:

- respondents on lower household incomes were more likely to be food insecure than those on higher incomes. For example, 53% of those earning less than £19,000 were food insecure, compared to 5% of those earning between £64,000 and £95,999.
- 36% of households with children under 16 years reported that they were food insecure compared to 23% of households without children under 16 years.
- respondents who live in the most deprived areas were more likely to report being food insecure compared to those who live in more deprived areas. For example, 41% of those who lived in the most deprived area (NIMDM 1) were food insecure compared to 21% of those who lived in the least deprived area (NIMDM 5).
- respondents who reported eating less of certain types of food in the last 12 months, reported financial reasons (e.g. cost of that type of food or reduced income) as the cause of eating less red meat (40%), processed meat (18%), processed food (17%), dairy and/or eggs (17%).

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<sup>4</sup> Food and You 2: Northern Ireland Wave 7-8 Key Findings, Food Standards Agency, November 2024  
<https://www.food.gov.uk/research/fy2-wave-7-8-ni-executive-summary>

The latest food basket report for Northern Ireland from Safefood and the FSA<sup>5</sup> found that some households living on a budget needed more than half of their income to afford a healthy food basket in 2024. The research found:

- The cost of a minimum essential healthy food basket for the four household types ranged from £71 to £276.
- The minimum food costs for the 2-parent household with 3 children in pre-school, primary school and secondary school required the highest proportion of household income, accounting for over half (63.3%) of their state benefit income in 2024.
- For households with children, an average of just under two-thirds (64%) of the minimum food costs came from meat, fruit, vegetables, dairy products, bread and cereals.

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> What is the Cost of a Healthy Food Basket in Northern Ireland in 2024?, Safefood and the Food Standards Agency, September 2025

<https://www.food.gov.uk/research/food-insecurity/what-is-the-cost-of-a-healthy-food-basket-in-northern-ireland-in-2024>

<sup>6</sup> 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>

<sup>7</sup> House of Commons Library, Economic update: How resilient are current supply chains? (April 2026)  
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10650/>

Recently published Consumer Council for Northern Ireland research<sup>8</sup> which examined levels of food insecurity in families found that it is a significant problem in Northern Ireland. Those most affected include families on lower incomes, those in receipt of benefits, single parent households, those with a disability and those with special dietary requirements. The research found that inadequate food and worrying about costs have impacted the mental health, physical health, social lives and relationships of many families. Children are also affected with parents reporting impacts on their children's emotional wellbeing, behaviour, concentration and friendships.

The key findings from the research are:

### **Food Insecurity Levels**

- Almost two in five (39%) of households with children were experiencing food insecurity.
- Over half (51%) of families stated they were worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- Two in five (40%) claimed the food they bought just didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more.
- Over two in five (42%) stated that they, or others in their household, couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.
- In the past 12 months, over a third (35%) stated they, or others in their household, had to cut the size of their meal or skip it completely because there wasn't enough money for food. For some consumers, this action was taken 'every month' (8%) or 'almost every month' (5%).
- Over the past 12 months, around a fifth (19%) stated they, or others in their household, had to go without food for an entire day. This was an action taken 'every month' (5%) or 'almost every month' (3%) by some consumers.
- Over half (51%) of food insecure families were not receiving free school meals.

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<sup>8</sup> Feeding the Family, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, June 2026  
<https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/research/feeding-family>

## **Affordability**

- Three quarters (75%) of consumers stated they had difficulty covering essential household expenses to some degree.
- Around seven in ten (71%) stated they have had to cut back on basic expenses when money is tight.
- Consumers cited birthdays, Christmas and other celebrations (44%) as times when sacrifices were most often made. School holidays were also noted by over a third of respondents (36%) as particularly difficult. Just under a third confirmed difficulties all year round (32%).

## **Factors that influence food choices**

- Almost half (47%) of households face barriers when eating healthily as a family.
- Cost was cited as the main barrier by over three quarters (76%) of those families struggling to eat healthily. Others cited difficulties due to having picky eaters in the family (53%) and having limited time to plan or prepare healthier food (36%).
- Amongst those that have picky eaters in the family, almost nine in ten (88%) said that children's food preferences impact what meals are prepared on at least two to three occasions a week.
- Over one in five (22%) of households have someone in their family that has special dietary requirements such as food allergies or intolerances.

## **Non-monetary impacts**

- In the past 12 months, concerns about food have impacted the social lives (49%) and mental health (49%) of households with children. Concerns about food have also impacted the physical health of family members (43%) and had a detrimental impact on relationships within the home (37%).
- A lack of access to a sufficient quantity and quality of food has impacted the emotional wellbeing of almost a third (31%) of children within the household. Other impacts include children's behaviour at home (28%), their friendships and social life (25%), and concentration levels at school (25%).

- Almost half (48%) of households who find it difficult to cover their household expenses either ‘always’ or ‘often’ try to hide financial difficulties from their children.

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> **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.
- 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.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-and-you-wave5-northern-ireland-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University, 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>

- 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)*

#### **What works:**

- Direct cash payments to help meet the rising costs of essentials including food, for example, Holiday Hunger payments, Healthy Start payments, etc.
- Buying reduced price food, including buying reduced price food and freezing it for later use.
- Accessing help with food through Women’s Centres including the use of social supermarkets where available and accessing food through FareShare (though should not be a long-term solution to food insecurity).
- Accessing help with food through Foodbanks including getting referrals through Women’s Centres (though should not be a long-term solution to food insecurity).
- Using online Apps to find out about reduced food and free food (depending on accessibility and access to transport).

#### **What’s not working:**

- Rising food prices have resulted in women acting as the ‘shock absorbers’ of poverty in their homes – going without food themselves to ensure their children and families are fed.

- Being unable to afford essential food, including healthy food, has significant impacts on women's mental health causing anxiety and distress particularly as food insecurity tends to be a long-term issue not a short-term crisis.
- Rising food prices have meant resorting to cheaper, more processed, unhealthier food.
- Those with dietary restrictions (disabilities, allergies, intolerances) are even more excluded from food security as this food can be particularly expensive.
- Responses to food insecurity assume that people have the time, flexibility and access to transport needed to avail of help with the costs of food.

## **Question 2 - Experiences of seeking support for food in Northern Ireland**

Increasing foodbank use also points 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 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.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland, Trussell NI, March 2026  
[https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/eyes\\_factsheet\\_ni\\_2025.pdf](https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/eyes_factsheet_ni_2025.pdf)

Social supermarkets provide food, cleaning products and toiletries at discounted prices. Social supermarkets are located in the buildings of community organisations across Belfast including a number of Women's Centres. Women's Centres also provide a range of other help to women including advice and guidance, help with children's clothes, white goods, referrals to foodbanks and emotional support.

### **Case Study – Social Supermarket at Footprints Women's Centre, Belfast**

Footprints Social Supermarket was established on site in the Women's Centre in 2017 in response to the growing numbers of referrals Footprints was making to a local food bank. The Social Supermarket is a heavily discounted store for everyday essentials, offering women a shopping experience as an alternative to food banks in a way that makes them feel they have agency and dignity in meeting their families' needs.

Footprints vision is to improve the access and affordability of healthy food in the Colin area of Belfast and to reduce personal and societal environmental impact. There are deep seated drivers underlying food insecurity in the Colin Neighbourhood. Neither rises in working households, nor rising national income, seems to be preventing significant numbers of people experiencing food insecurity. The continually rising cost of living has eliminated any 'buffer income' for many, quickly plunging family budgets into crisis. Women can be vulnerable on all four pillars of food security, (availability, access, utilisation and stability). This is because they are susceptible to the drivers of poverty, within the workplace, the household and within society.

The Social Supermarket operated at Footprints Women's Centre, provides women with access to a range of food that supports them and their families. More importantly, it is a gateway to a huge range of other support services, including social, emotional, mental and economic support.

When a woman is registered as a Social Supermarket member she may shop in the Social Supermarket once a week for a period of up to 6 months, though this can be extended if needed. New members also meet with a support worker who will assess their needs and a tailored package of individual support will be put in place.

Food in the Social Supermarket is individually priced and is 75% below retail prices. Food stocked in the Social Supermarket includes surplus, quality food provided by FareShare, ranging from fresh meat, fish, fruit & veg, to dairy produce, frozen and ambient foods. Footprints kitchen prepares a range of fresh soups, baked goods and healthy takeaway meals, which are stocked in the Social Supermarket. Toiletries, household cleaning products and pet food are purchased to supply the Social Supermarket.

Beneficiaries are women and families living in the Colin Neighbourhood, an area of multiple disadvantage, with a population of approximately 30,000. The population falls within the 6% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Colin has the highest percentage of lone parent households: 30% compared to the average of 17%. The vast majority of lone parents are women.

As well as supporting women who are not in employment, education or training, Footprints have seen a rise in the number of “working poor” i.e., those people who have an income, but the income is not enough to meet their needs, or it is sporadic and inconsistent. 100 women use the social supermarket every week, accessing sufficient food to feed their families.

Since 2018 Footprints has handled 840,000kg of surplus food through the Social Supermarket and its other food related activities. Most of the surplus food from FareShare passes through the Social Supermarket and equates to over 200,000 meals for families experiencing food poverty and a saving of 252,000 tons of carbon emissions.

*“I was working self-employed when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. As I have a three year old child and was unable to work I was advised that I would need to go on Universal Credit. Shortly after surgery I had to go to the Job Centre to produce documents for my benefit claim. I waited eight weeks and was paid £258 after this wait.*

*In that time, I was informed by my landlord that if I didn't make a rent payment I would be evicted. As I had no money, I had to use a food bank, but the foodbank did not provide fresh food. Poor people should be able to eat fresh and healthy food, not processed canned food especially if you're ill. I felt stripped of my dignity during a very difficult time. I felt I was punished for being ill and being a single parent.*

*I now receive £480 per month after rent is paid for me and my daughter to live on. It's very difficult given the hospital, doctors and physio appointments I need to attend. Footprints has been a good source of support and has helped both me and my daughter. The Social Supermarket has been a lifeline as there is fresh food and we can both eat healthy again”.*

***“The social supermarket is great – you can get a lot of fresh stuff for much cheaper there. I feel lucky to be able to use it and I’m very mindful in that I only take what I need. It gives people dignity as well. They make food for people too and it’s really well reduced.”***

***“You get your shopping and pay a small fee and then you have to look at your finances. They are so lovely they can give you advice and guide you. It’s good to have that support.”***

***“The social supermarket is great, you pay £5 and get a good lot including fresh fruit and vegetables.”***

***“Anxiety, sleeplessness, stress, panic attacks. Due to constantly having the thought in your head about the next meal and worrying if the gas or electric is going to run out.”***

***“I used to spend £60 a week on shopping for me and the three kids. Now it’s over £100/week. I ended up going to the social supermarket it helps me so much. You sign up for £5 and then you pay a small amount for your shopping. I got a big shop there and it cost me £7 and that did me a week and a half.”***

***“The social supermarket is great. You sign up and then can go in and get what you need for a small amount and there’s fresh food too.”***

#### **What works:**

- Food support provides the ability to access food to provide for children and families when it is unaffordable or they have insufficient income.
- Ability to access other wraparound supports that are available with some food support – such as benefits/debt advice with social supermarkets, etc.

#### **What’s not working:**

- Issues with stigma and shame in seeking food support which can result in some people who really need this support not using it.
- Accessibility issues with some people not being able to travel to access support or not being able to leave children or their care dependants.
- Limited availability of fresh food available through some food supports which can lead to difficulties maintaining a healthy diet.

- Unsuitable food for those who have food allergies, intolerances, health conditions, religious dietary practices, ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder) and autism-related food sensitivities.

***“You’re embarrassed. What if someone sees me going to a foodbank, I wouldn’t do it, I wouldn’t want anyone to see me there. It’s the shame of it.”***

***“They have Fareshare in my son’s school – you can pay £2 for a bag of food items. I don’t do it – it downgrades me.”***

***“I could really use some extra help but I’d never go to a foodbank I’d be too embarrassed I’d rather go without food.”***

### **Questions 3, 4 & 5 - Experiences of the impact of free school meals, community kitchens and social protection safety nets**

#### **Free School Meals in Northern Ireland (including Holiday Hunger payments)**

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> 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>

day.<sup>14</sup> Since 2025 the Republic of Ireland have introduced a free hot meal for every child in primary school.

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.

In 2023, the Department for Education in Northern Ireland announced that the Holiday Hunger Scheme would no longer provide support to families (approx. 96,300) entitled to Free School Meals<sup>15</sup> 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. 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.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the 'Extended 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.<sup>17</sup> This is why access to food has formed a significant plank of

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<sup>14</sup> 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](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)

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

<sup>16</sup> A qualitative exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on food decisions of economically disadvantaged families in Northern Ireland, BMC Public Health, December 2021  
[A qualitative exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on food decisions of economically disadvantaged families in Northern Ireland | BMC Public Health | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-021-02100-0)

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

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 Universal Credit. **These provisions have not been extended to children in Northern Ireland which will create new inequalities for children here.**

A briefing paper by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)<sup>18</sup> 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.

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<sup>18</sup> 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>

## Healthy Start Scheme

The Healthy Start Scheme provides important protections against food insecurity. Healthy Start is devolved and administered by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has the lowest uptake level of Healthy Start compared to England and Wales. There are roughly 21,000 people eligible to receive Healthy Start but statistics show that uptake is only 52.7%.<sup>19</sup>

Northern Ireland research found that awareness of the scheme was low, and it was notable that a number of women had missed out on this payment – either completely for some children, or had only found out long after they had become entitled. Some also missed out on receiving the higher payment (when a child is aged between 0 – 1 years old). One parent said: *“I found out about it in the Women’s Centre. My wee boy was a year and a half and I’m on my own with him. I missed most of it when I really needed it because I didn’t know”*. Another parent missed out on the scheme altogether for her first two children, as she explained: *“I only found out about it with my third child, I missed out on it for my first two kids. My health visitor only told me when my third child was one”*.<sup>20</sup>

An ARK policy brief on the Healthy Start Scheme in Northern Ireland<sup>21</sup> highlights the current challenges with the Scheme:

1. **Low awareness and Uptake** – Northern Ireland has lower levels of uptake of Healthy Start than England and Wales. There is substantial geographic variation in uptake levels across the Trust areas, with the lowest uptake in the Southern Trust area (48%) compared to the highest uptake level at 57% in the Belfast Trust area.
2. **The value of the scheme is not enough** - despite the rising cost of food, the Government has not adjusted the level of support in line with inflation.

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<sup>19</sup> Healthy Start scheme in Northern Ireland, ARK Policy Brief, June 2024  
<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-06/policybrief28.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Healthy Start scheme in Northern Ireland, ARK Policy Brief, June 2024  
<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-06/policybrief28.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Healthy Start scheme in Northern Ireland, ARK Policy Brief, June 2024  
<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-06/policybrief28.pdf>

It is disappointing that the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland<sup>22</sup> contained no actions to address the low levels of awareness and uptake of the Healthy Start Scheme in Northern Ireland.

In April 2021, the value of Healthy Start was increased from £3.10 to £4.25 – the first increase since 2010. The level of support through the scheme has not kept in line with inflation. This is particularly worrying as some products which can be purchased through the scheme, such as infant formula, have risen significantly faster than food inflation and are at historically high prices (Competition and Markets Authority, 2024). As a result, Healthy Start funds are not enough to cover costs. Research participants have raised the cost of formula milk with one saying: *“My newborn is drinking £11 formula a week. How does that work with the value of the card?”*. In general, parents agreed that most food now exceeds the value of the Healthy Start allowance and one parent said: *“It’s £4.25 per week – if you think about how much a box of strawberries is at the minute it would hardly cover it.”*

Leading campaign groups and charities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland have called for the value of Healthy Start payments to rise in line with rising food prices. In December 2022, over 110 organisations wrote to Ministers, and the Chief Executive of the NHS Business Service Authority, calling for an immediate increase to the Healthy Start amount in line with inflation and for the Government to commit to review its value every six months.<sup>23</sup>

Calculations by the Food Foundation show that if the payments had increased in line with food inflation since April 2021, they would be worth at least £5.88 as of April 2026, which is £1.23 more per week compared to the current value.<sup>24</sup> Over the course of a year, that means families are losing out on at least £63.96 worth of fruit, vegetables, and other essentials, rising to £127.92 for families with a child under one. It is difficult to understand why the payment is not updated in line with inflation, particularly as this

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-ni-executive-anti-poverty-strategy>

<sup>23</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/Healthy%20Start%20coalition%20letter.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/press-release/new-data-shows-extending-healthy-start-eligibility-help-cost-living-could-generate>

happens to other social security payments such as Universal Credit. Moreover, the comparable scheme in Scotland, Best Start Foods, saw an uplift by 10.1% in 2023, reflecting high food inflation rates and has since risen again in 2025 to £5.60/week.

Recently published research by the Food Foundation and Sustain<sup>25</sup> has found that: *“The Healthy Start Scheme provides a critical nutritional safety net for low-income families with young children to afford fruit, veg and milk. However, the scheme remains underpowered and is not sufficiently resourced to adequately address the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on very young children.”* This research highlights how investing in Healthy Start is a good investment. Expanding eligibility to all families in receipt of Universal Credit would return £2.36 for every £1 invested. The net benefits to society would be worth £7.7 billion over 10 years as a result of the reductions in food insecurity, increased household disposable income, and wider economic gains.

The National Food Strategy (2021)<sup>26</sup> has also recommended that the scheme should be available to all households earning under £20,000 and expanding the scheme to all families on Universal Credit. It also recommends that the age limit should be raised to include children under five years old. In addition to this, it also calls for the scheme to include every pregnant woman regardless of age or income.

Food Foundation research<sup>27</sup> has found that rising food prices are hitting lower-income families hardest, and without urgent government action to widen eligibility and increase the scheme's value in line with inflation, more children risk going without the nutritious food essential to their health and development.

***“Healthy Start vouchers – they should pay for a tub of baby milk without having to put money to it.”***

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<sup>25</sup> The Healthy Start Scheme: Unlocking its potential to support with family food bills and tackle child food insecurity, The Food Foundation, Sustain & University of Birmingham, June 2026  
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-06/Healthy%20Start%20Briefing%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> The National Food Strategy: The Plan, July 2021  
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61684fe3e90e071979dfec4a/national-food-strategy-the-plan.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> The Healthy Start Scheme: Unlocking its potential to support with family food bills and tackle child food insecurity, The Food Foundation, Sustain & University of Birmingham, June 2026  
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-06/Healthy%20Start%20Briefing%20FINAL.pdf>

***“The price of formula milk for babies is awful. You used to get two for £16 and now it’s £10.50 a tin. The Healthy Start card isn’t enough. £17 doesn’t cover what you need. In some places Aptamil formula milk is £17.50.”***

***“I have been using the foodbank since before Christmas. I try and buy things in the shops that are reduced and freeze them. I try and make sure my kids eat healthy but healthy food is so much more expensive compared to processed food. I don’t want my kids eating rubbish. I get Healthy Start vouchers and I use these for milk, fruit and vegetables and it’s a great help for me.”***

***“I have a Healthy Start card but now my daughter is on prescription milk I actually have the money on it now to get some fruit and vegetables where before it was all going on formula.”***

***“You can use the Healthy Start card to buy fruit and vegetables but how much does £17 buy you? Not very much.”***

***“My baby is on Aptamil formula and it’s £16 a tin now. I was going without food to make sure she had it. I was eating dry cereal just so she could get the formula she needs. The stress of getting down to the bottom of the tin and thinking will I have enough to get her her milk.”***

***“My daughter is a fussy eater she eats fruit for breakfast and won’t eat toast and she eats fruit for lunch too. It’s so expensive. The scheme is for healthy living for fruit, etc. But just look at the cost of fruit!”***

***“I’ve only one child and he will go through a punnet of blueberries, a punnet of raspberries and a punnet of strawberries in maybe 3 days. It just makes me laugh this whole 5 fruit and vegetables a day – you’re giving me enough money to feed my child 2 pieces for maybe one day. It doesn’t make any sense.”***

***“My kid has dietary requirements and I’m waiting on a dietician for her. She still has to be on formula and she’s now 15 months so I’m still having to buy formula but have a lot less money to do that with now.”***

***“My child is on special milk and its £2.20/litre and it’s done in nearly 2 days. So that’s £2.20 that often so I’m spending over £10/week on milk with a one year old. My newborn is drinking £11 formula a week. How does that work with the value of the card?”***

***“It shouldn’t go down once the child is one. When you get it you should just get it the same until it’s over. You should get it for the 4 years and that’s the way it should be.”***

## **Social Security Safety Net**

Research shows that many people on Universal Credit are struggling to meet their essential bills including food. Figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show that around 5 in 6 low-income households on Universal Credit are currently going without essentials. Support has eroded over decades and the basic rate of Universal Credit (the standard allowance) is now at around its lowest ever level as a proportion of average earnings.<sup>28</sup> Research shows that inadequate social security is the main driver of foodbank need.

As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation states without an evidence-based foundation, the annual process for uprating Universal Credit is rendered effectively arbitrary, as the updated rates never reflect the real cost of essentials. This has enabled a substantial shortfall between the amount people receive and what basic items actually cost, fuelling poverty, hardship and the need for food banks.<sup>29</sup>

The Women's Regional Consortium supports the call by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell for an Essentials Guarantee. An Essentials Guarantee would embed in the social security system the principle that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials. It would ensure that everyone has a protected minimum amount of support in Universal Credit to afford essentials. The Essentials Guarantee would enshrine in legislation:

1. a legal minimum (the 'Essentials Guarantee') in Universal Credit — the standard allowance would need to at least meet this amount, and deductions (such as debt repayments to government, or as a result of the benefit cap) would not be allowed to reduce support below that level
2. an independent process to regularly recommend the Essentials Guarantee level, based on the cost of essentials (such as food, utilities and vital household items) for the adults in a household (excluding rent and council tax).

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/independent-process-to-ensure-universal-credit-covers-essential-costs>

### *Carer's Allowance*

Many carers face additional costs associated with providing care. As highlighted by the Carer Poverty Commission NI the inescapable extra costs of providing care, including additional food, energy and transportation costs, are crucial to understanding the difficulties unpaid carers face. These extra costs make carers more vulnerable to the hardships of the cost-of-living crisis, which is further squeezing already tight budgets. Carers are often unable to cut back any further. Without support to ease the financial pressure they're facing, many carers have no way to make ends meet and are making increasingly desperate decisions to get by.<sup>30</sup>

Research from the Carer Poverty Commission NI shows that over 1 in 4 unpaid carers (28.3%) live in poverty in Northern Ireland, higher than the poverty rate in non-carers (17.4%) and higher than the poverty rate amongst carers in the rest of the UK (23.6%).<sup>31</sup> Figures show that women are more likely to provide unpaid care with women making up 59% of all carers and those carers of working age.<sup>32</sup>

Carer's Allowance, the main benefit for people providing unpaid care for family or friends, remains the lowest benefit of its kind at just £86.45 per week (2026/27 rates). Part of the eligibility for Carer's Allowance is an earnings limit of £204 a week. These low values in terms of payment and earnings means that many carers struggle to make ends meet. Carers NI have been calling for some time for the value of Carer's Allowance to be increased, the introduction of a taper to the earnings threshold and for a monthly Carers Essentials Payment to help carers to better afford the inescapable

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<sup>30</sup> The experiences of poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, A report from the Carer Poverty Commission NI, Carers NI & WPI Economics, August 2023  
<https://wpieconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CPC-Qualitative-Research-Report-Digital.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, Carer Poverty Commission NI, October 2023  
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/vpala4ts/policy-measures-to-tackle-poverty-among-unpaid-carers-in-northern-ireland.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Tackling poverty amongst unpaid carers, Carer Poverty Commission Northern Ireland 2023 – 2025, July 2025  
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/rjiboesm/carers-ni-carer-poverty-commission-final-report-2025.pdf>

higher costs of caring they face for the likes of transport, food, energy and clothing (including school uniforms).<sup>33</sup>

***“Carer’s Allowance is really low, it’s terrible. I care for my two sons and if you divide it by two sure it’s nothing.”***

***“Carer’s Allowance is an insult, it’s far too low, it makes me angry.”***

***“Carers Allowance should be increased. I’m living on it and two other benefits and without those I couldn’t manage. Even then it’s not enough for people to live on.”***

***“I don’t understand how somebody is meant to live on the value of Carer’s Allowance. How are you meant to survive on it? It’s tough.”***

***“I’m a full time carer for my daddy who lives with me. He’s 79. The way we’re living I feel it’s affecting our family because you’re stressed out all the time over the price of things. The overthinking is terrible, worry, worry, worry about the costs of everything.”***

***“I’m noticing the cost of transport. The prices of the buses went up and you notice it for appointments. Gas is a big one for heating the house. Food as well – constantly buying food. I have two children with autism and its only certain foods they’ll eat. I can’t even go for cheaper brands in certain things.”***

### **What’s working**

- Direct cash payments to help meet the rising costs of essentials including food, for example, Holiday Hunger payments, Healthy Start payments, etc (subject to maintaining rates with food price inflation).
- Free school meals which adequately reach those on the lowest incomes who feel the impacts of the rising cost of food most sharply and ideally Universal Free School Meals including provision during holiday periods.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

## **What's not working**

- The safety net provided by the social security system including through Universal Credit is not working leaving many of those on benefits struggling to meet their essential bills including food.
- Carer's Allowance in terms of its value and low earnings threshold is inadequate leaving many unpaid carers in financial hardship.
- Where social security support exists it does not account for the higher food costs linked to disability, illness or specialist diets.

## **Question 6 - Evidence on the importance of a living wage for all on the ability to feed individuals and families**

Many workers are also trapped in food insecurity and particularly in Northern Ireland where there is a heavy reliance on low-paid work many workers experience working poverty. Northern Ireland was one of the regions with the highest proportion of jobs paid below the real Living at 17.3% second in the list behind the North East (18.8%) and the East Midlands (17.2%).<sup>34</sup> Women continue to be disproportionately affected by low pay, with 58.6% of all jobs paid below the real Living Wage in 2025 held by women.

Research from the Living Wage Foundation highlights the worrying position of workers paid below the real Living Wage.<sup>35</sup> The key findings from the report show:

- 12% of low-paid workers have no money left over each week or find themselves further in debt after paying for basics.
- Almost 6 in 10 (59%) skipped meals, turned off the heating, fell behind on bills or took out a pay-day loan in the past year to cover essentials.
- Over 2 in 5 have used a foodbank (42%) in the past year.

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<sup>34</sup> Employee jobs paid below the real Living Wage: 2025, Living Wage Foundation, February 2026 <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-05/Employee%20Jobs%20Paid%20Below%20the%20Real%20Living%20Wage%202025%20-%20Living%20Wage%20Foundation%20Research%202026.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Life on Low Pay, Living Wage Foundation, October 2025 <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-10/Life%20on%20Low%20Pay%202025.pdf>

- Some groups are disproportionately affected. For example, though 24% of all low paid workers have no savings, this rises to 27% of women and 36% of disabled workers.
- 2 in 5 (42%) report that their level of pay negatively affects their mental health, and 1 in 3 (34%) report that it negatively affects their physical health.
- Almost two-thirds (65%) think the real Living Wage would positively affect their overall quality of life.

Women’s Regional Consortium research on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on women in Northern Ireland<sup>36</sup> involved 33% of women who were in some form of work either full or part-time. Many were in low-paid work and struggled to make ends meet on low incomes often without any access to help/support with their bills. These women felt the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on their ability to afford the essentials and reported frustration at the lack of financial support available to working families.

***“You’re not entitled to anything if you work. As soon as you’re not on any benefits you don’t get any help. Just because you’re working doesn’t mean you can afford life. There is no help for anyone who works.”***

***“A lot of people think that because you work you can afford things but I’m actually broke. People on benefits who go out to work lose their benefits too quickly. There should be help for people to get out to work but not lose their benefits as quickly. Government need to take into account the cost of rent, food, gas and electric costs.”***

***“My pay does not stretch to cover food costs and fuel. We’ve been buying cheaper brands to try and make it through the month.”***

***“I’m having to borrow for the way I normally live. I used to have a certain amount of money to cover my ordinary bills but that’s not there anymore. I have another week until I get paid so I’ll have to use my credit card to get whatever I need. It’s all essential stuff, it’s just for ordinary living.”***

***“People think that if you work you have plenty of money but we really struggle. They think that when you work you have everything you need but you don’t. You’re***

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<sup>36</sup> Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

*not always better off working, it shouldn't be like that. We don't get any help with school meals or school uniform and we really struggled with these costs."*

*"My partner works and we're just over the threshold to get help with school meals. It's really hard to keep up with the costs of lunches. We go through snacks twice as fast."*

*"Most working parents don't meet the criteria for help so they're stuck, maybe only earning a couple of pound extra and they don't get any help."*

*"Because we're working we're not able to claim any benefits but we really need help with food and gas. I really struggle. I'm really just buying the basics, buying own brands but even they have gone up in price."*

### **What's working**

- The Real Living Wage - the only UK wage rate independently calculated based solely on the actual cost of living.

### **What's not working**

- Low-income work – income is the central issue with many people working in low-paid, part-time and insecure work which does not allow them to afford the essentials including food. Women are more likely to find themselves in these patterns of work.
- Women's greater likelihood of providing care limits their ability to access paid work, increase their working hours or access better quality work which limits their income over their working lives and into their retirement.

## **Question 7 - The impact of policies that affect families' abilities to feed themselves and their communities (both positive and negative)**

Social security benefits are a vital defence against poverty and have an important role to play in easing the impact of poverty and economic shocks on people and families. As the Covid19 pandemic has shown, people need to be able to rely on the social security system when times get tough and they are hit by unexpected costs or lost earnings.

Without having such a safety net people are exposed to the damaging impacts of life cycle factors and economic risks. We have already referred to the inability of social

security benefits to provide a safety net against poverty and financial hardship. We refer to our answer to Questions 3, 4 and 5 with specific reference to Universal Credit and Carer's Allowance.

The safety net provided by the social security system has been weakened by a decade of welfare reform changes meaning that many people are unable to meet the costs of essential items such as food, heat and clothing and are unable to cope with unexpected life events such as a washing machine breaking down.

Welfare reform and austerity policies have disproportionately impacted on women. Research by the House of Commons Library shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.<sup>37</sup>

In Northern Ireland an analysis of the impact of the reforms by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)<sup>38</sup> showed that across most income levels the overall cash impact of the reforms is more negative for women than for men. Their most striking finding was that households with children experience much larger losses as a result of the reforms than those without children. This is particularly the case for lone parents (who are mostly women) who lose £2,250 on average, equivalent to almost 10% of their net income.

#### *Northern Ireland Mitigations Package*

In Northern Ireland a package of mitigation measures was agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive to protect some claimants from the harshest impacts of welfare reform.<sup>39</sup> This includes mitigation payments for the Benefit Cap and the Bedroom Tax.

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<sup>37</sup> Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms in Northern Ireland, NIHRC, November 2019

[https://www.nihrc.org/uploads/publications/Final\\_CIA\\_report\\_Oct\\_2019.pdf](https://www.nihrc.org/uploads/publications/Final_CIA_report_Oct_2019.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report, Professor Eileen Evason, January 2016

<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

The mitigation for the Bedroom Tax has subsequently been extended indefinitely and the mitigation for the Benefit Cap runs to the end of March 2028.

The Cliff Edge Coalition is made up of over 100 organisations from across the community and voluntary sector, academia and trade unions in Northern Ireland who came together in 2018 to campaign to sustain and strengthen these crucial welfare reform mitigations. These organisations span a range of concerned groups representing women, children, mental health, housing, poverty, food banks and many more.

Cliff Edge is campaigning for the continuation of the Benefit Cap mitigation as well as the further strengthening of the mitigations package in Northern Ireland. The campaign has three key asks which would help to strengthen the social security system and provide important protections against poverty especially for those most impacted.<sup>40</sup> These are:

- **Removing the two-child limit.** This is a highly gendered policy which is likely to have a harsher impact in Northern Ireland due to larger average family sizes compared to GB. Cliff Edge is pleased that the two-child limit was scrapped in April 2026 and believes that this action will help many larger families on the lowest incomes better meet their essential costs including food.
- **Resolving the five-week wait in Universal Credit.** Research by the Women's Regional Consortium clearly shows the negative impact of the five-week wait on low-income families and women.<sup>41</sup>
- **Provide support for private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance (LHA).** Rent has been rising at unprecedented levels in Northern Ireland, almost twice as fast as anywhere else in the UK. Successive cuts to housing benefits, paid at the Local Housing Allowance rate, mean that almost 9 out of 10 of private rental properties in NI are out of reach for people receiving housing benefits.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CEC-Full-Member-Briefing-May-2023-.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, Women's Regional Consortium, September 2020  
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Impact%20of%20Universal%20Credit%20on%20WomenRevised.pdf>

The Women’s Regional Consortium believes that these strengthened mitigations would provide vital protections for the people of Northern Ireland especially for the many women who have been so adversely affected by welfare reform policies. They are even more necessary in the context of the Cost-of-Living Crisis which like any other economic crisis tends to hit women harder.

The independent Welfare Mitigations Review Report<sup>42</sup> has recommended retaining the existing mitigations for the Benefit Cap and the Bedroom Tax in addition to a number of new mitigations for Northern Ireland. Their recommendations to strengthen the mitigations package target households on a low income and those containing an adult and/or a child with a disability alongside benefitting women in particular. As stated by the Cliff Edge Coalition by implementing the recommendations in the Welfare Mitigations Review it would move towards creating a social security system in Northern Ireland which is closer to a human rights-based model: *“Expanding the mitigations and implementing recommendations contained in The Review Report, would help further realise economic and social rights under Articles 9 and 11 of ICESCR – the right to social security and to an adequate standard of living.”*

***“Universal Credit has put me into debt. At no point before this was I without electric, wondering how I was going to feed my kids for the next few days and sitting with no heat, but now with Universal Credit I am.”***

***“We had to wait 6-7 weeks on the first payment of Universal Credit and it was an absolute nightmare. We really struggled. We had to go to the foodbank and call St Vincent de Paul for help.”***

*Healthy Start and Holiday Hunger Payments*

We again want to raise the impact of policies such as the Holiday Hunger payments and Healthy Start which help families to feed themselves. We stress that the best solution

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<sup>42</sup> Welfare Mitigations Review, Independent Advisory Panel Report, October 2022  
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-welfare-mitigations-review-independent-advisory-panel-report-2022.pdf>

in order to help families with the cost of food is an increase in income to allow them to afford these essential costs. We have already outlined the importance of the Healthy Start Scheme in our answer to Questions 3, 4 and 5. We highlight the low awareness levels of this Scheme in Northern Ireland and the need for an increase in the rates of Healthy Start as outlined in the ARK policy brief<sup>43</sup> and in a report from the Food Foundation.<sup>44</sup>

In relation to the Holiday Hunger Scheme, the Women's Regional Consortium has recently responded to the call for evidence by the NI Assembly Committee for Education into the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill.<sup>45</sup> The Women's Regional Consortium supports the Bill which would reinstate essential support that was removed in 2023 without the benefit of political accountability and scrutiny.

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. This provision continued to support families as the Cost-of-Living Crisis 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.*"<sup>46</sup>

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.

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<sup>43</sup> Healthy Start scheme in Northern Ireland, ARK Policy Brief, June 2024  
<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-06/policybrief28.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> The Healthy Start Scheme: Unlocking its potential to support with family food bills and tackle child food insecurity, The Food Foundation, Sustain & University of Birmingham, June 2026  
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-06/Healthy%20Start%20Briefing%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Joint-WRC-and-UU-Response-to-Education-Holiday-Meal-Payments-Bill-Call-for-Evidence-June-2026.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Robbie Meredith, Cutting Holiday Hunger money most difficult decision, says civil servant  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66003322>

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 during holiday periods would help to ensure that families are better able to provide healthy, nutritious food for their children which has positive impacts for their health, wellbeing and learning.

Our joint research with women in Northern Ireland on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis<sup>47</sup> 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.**

***“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.”***

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<sup>47</sup> 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>

***“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)*

### **What’s working**

- Policies which increase income – in the words of Trussell *“hunger isn’t a food problem, it’s an income problem.”*
- Policies like universal free school meals, holiday hunger payments and Healthy Start all help to address the rising cost of food and provide some respite for families, particularly women, who struggle to meet these costs.

- The NI Mitigations package is protecting many claimants from the harshest impacts of welfare reform through providing protections from the Bedroom Tax and the Benefit Cap in Northern Ireland.

### **What's not working**

- Cuts to social security benefits and benefit rules which fail to recognise the unique lived experiences of certain groups of people including women. Rather than acting as a safety net, structural flaws with benefits like Universal Credit entrench financial dependence, punish unpaid care and leave women open to poverty and abuse.
- Social security benefits which are not based on the actual cost of essentials meaning that many people are struggling to live dignified, healthy lives and provide for their children and families with what they receive through social security.
- Lack of investment in social security particularly for vulnerable groups leads to long-term increases in costs across Government departments due to worsening health outcomes, isolation, poorer educational outcomes, increased economic inactivity, increased social care costs and increased levels of crime.

### **Question 8 - Evidence on solutions that reach those most marginalised including homeless, unemployed and those living with ill health or disability**

It is clear that current food and welfare systems are failing to prevent hunger, hardship and harm to many groups including women, unpaid carers, people with disabilities and those who are the most marginalised in society. We do not have any specific evidence on the solutions that would reach the homeless and those living with ill health or disability.

Solutions are needed to reach the most marginalised including the many women who are struggling to make ends meet as lone parents and unpaid carers. It is clear that

inadequate food impacts their own health and wellbeing as well as the health and wellbeing of their children and those they care for.

We have stressed the need for an increase in income throughout our response particularly through investment in the social security system, including in Carer's Allowance, and in tackling low pay. We believe that policy actions in these areas would help to ensure that more women and families would be able to access the food they need to live dignified, healthy lives. We have outlined a number of specific actions including Universal Free School Meals, reinstating Holiday Hunger payments and increasing the amount and awareness of Healthy Start payments would particularly help the most low-income women.

### **Question 9 - How a right to food law could work in the UK, including evidence from right to food cities on lessons learned**

We do not have any evidence from right to food cities.

A Right to Food law must be specific and enforceable not merely aspirational. It must include entitlements to appropriate food with recognition of specific dietary requirements. The right must not only be for food but to the means to store, prepare and cook food safely.

Poverty is often the driver behind inadequate food. We believe that the right to food cannot exist without income adequacy. Living in poverty has an impact on all aspects of life and therefore the right to food also needs to be advanced alongside other social and economic rights which tackle poverty including the right to access adequate social security and the right to adequate housing. There must also be a recognition that unpaid care has an economic value and this is essential to prevent carers from facing poverty.

A Right to Food Law should recognise the importance of preventative investment understanding that meeting dietary needs avoids greater costs in the longer-term.

## **Question 10 - What should the right to food law include regarding government duties?**

The UK is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which sets out the right to food in Article 11 through the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living and to Freedom from Hunger. Despite being a signatory to ICESCR, the UK has not yet given it legal status under domestic law. This is a rights-based approach to food which shifts the focus from temporary and charitable provision such as that provided by foodbanks to a binding legal obligation. It empowers people to demand fair access to adequate nutrition and enforces State accountability.

The Women's Regional Consortium want to see the Government take a human rights approach to food as essential for survival rather than treating it as commodity. Emergency food support does not meaningfully fulfil the right to food. A right to food law must go much deeper taking a human rights approach to ensure human dignity, the right to nourishing, culturally appropriate, accessible food which is produced fairly and which minimises environmental harms. Any right to food law should legally oblige the government to eliminate hunger, malnutrition and food poverty.

We believe that government should take a cross-departmental approach to the right to food which recognises that access to nutritious food is linked to health, employment, education, justice and housing. We also want to see any right to food law take account of the different circumstances that people experience including the need to embed food provision that accounts for health, disability and cultural needs.

Any legally binding right to food must be designed to protect vulnerable communities and prevents shifting the burden on to those people who are least able to afford it similar to the disproportionate impacts seen in past social security reforms.

## **Questions 11 & 12 – Monitoring and Accountability**

Monitoring the impact and progress of a right to food law requires evaluating both the impact on people (including vulnerable groups) and the enforcement of legal obligations by the state.

The Women’s Regional Consortium believe that lived experience must inform the design, delivery and monitoring of a right to food law. We believe that there should be no implementation without involving lived experience and without the necessary accountability mechanisms that reach those who are the most excluded from these processes.

It is clear that better policy making is a result of including the voices of lived experience in the process. There is a need for work on the part of government on how they are going to integrate the experiences of people living in food insecurity as part of policy development on the right to food. Government must set out clearly how people with lived experience will be involved in the ongoing design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the right to food law.

### **Models of integrating lived experience into policy making:**

#### **The Scottish Experience**

‘Social Security Experience Panels’ were established in Scotland in 2017. The aim of the Experience Panels was to design the new Scottish social security system with direct input from people with lived experience of the previous UK system.

The panels ran for six years, with more than 2,400 people participating in interviews, focus groups, workshops and surveys. Panel members contributed to the research about specific benefits previously delivered by the UK Government, as well as some new ones. The Experience Panels formally closed at the end of March 2024 because the migration to Social Security Scotland was complete.

'Client Panels' were launched in 2020 in recognition of the need for engaging people with lived experience for ongoing development and improvement of Social Security Scotland.

Findings from research about the impact of the experience panels included:

- 82% of respondents said that it was clear how Experience Panels research was used to inform the design of the new social security system in Scotland.
- 81% said that they felt being part of the Experience Panels had allowed them to shape the new social security system.
- 87% said that the Experience Panels were a good way to ensure people with lived experience helped to design the new social security system.
- 91% of respondents said that they had enjoyed taking part in the Experience Panels.
- 81% of respondents said that they had felt listened to.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Northern Ireland Examples:**

The NI Anti-Poverty Network hosts an active Lived Experience panel designed to ensure the voices of individuals directly experiencing hardship are at the heart of policymaking and campaigning in Northern Ireland.

In 2006, NIAPN facilitated lived experience focus groups and workshops as part of the **Get Heard** project, which was a UK wide project working through a range of Anti-Poverty Groups and other partners. It aimed to spread awareness on the National Action Plans (NAP) for Social Inclusion, which was a European Union anti-poverty policy that placed a requirement on all EU states to produce action plans every two years on how they aim to tackle poverty in their country. It was supported by the European Commission and the Department for Work & Pensions.

These are just two examples, but there is an urgent need to go beyond soundbites and tick box consultation processes. Furthermore, there are many community and voluntary

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-experience-panels-legacy-report/>

organisations that have lived experience panels already in place. There needs to be a mechanism for government to embed lived experience. There is a need to go beyond tokenism and realise that those with lived experience know best what needs to change in order to make improvements in their lives, in their families and communities.

The women's sector in Northern Ireland has many years' experience of consulting with women. Guidance produced by Women's Regional Consortium members, the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) contains important tips in promoting women's participation in public policy making.<sup>49</sup> These include the need to work together with the women's community and voluntary sector, making time for accessible face to face engagement, keeping language accessible and relevant, listening to the stories from women and making women visible in the product as well as the process.

Civil society organisations are best placed to monitor the government's progress under the right to food including organisations who work with those in poverty. Any monitoring role should involve the five-year periodic reviews presented to the United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights by the UK government around the progress in realising the right to food and achieving food security within the context of an adequate standard of living.

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<sup>49</sup> Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women's Organisations, WRDA, November 2017  
[https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)