



Barnardo's Northern Ireland Response to the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the past year we worked with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support.

We agree with the policy objectives of this Bill. As the cost-of-living crisis continues to deepen, children and families are bearing the brunt of the cost of inaction. The reality of child poverty in Northern Ireland is stark; child poverty remains stubbornly high, with around 73,000 children growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland. In 2024, one in three (32%) children in Northern Ireland were growing up in food insecure households. Among households experiencing food insecurity, 14% have three or more children, compared with 6% of households in Northern Ireland overall. This Bill aims to support 90,000 children who are in receipt of free school meals but currently do not receive any support during school holidays, which leaves families without consistent nutritional meals for weeks at a time.

School holidays are a particularly hard time for households experiencing food insecurity. During the days and weeks when children are not in school, families are under enormous pressure with childcare needs, finding opportunities for play and activities, and meeting basic necessities such as heating and providing nutritional meals.

Our Child Poverty Fund opened for applications for families, children and young people accessing Barnardo's services across the UK in November 2024. The Child Poverty Fund aims to help children, young people, and families feel safe, happy, healthy, hopeful – no matter their background or circumstances. During the 2025 Summer period, £29,000 was given to 132 households in Northern Ireland. 50% of this support was for preventing holiday hunger.

What this tells us is that we need a direct intervention to support these families and children, and this Bill is a step towards ending holiday hunger and ensuring that 90,000 children are not going hungry during the holidays. Clause 1 makes clear that the Education Authority will have a legislative duty to support children with a financial payment equivalent to the cost of school meals, ensuring that financial support will be in line with the current cost of school meals. Clause 1 also places an obligation on the EA to keep a record of how they support children,

and that this must be shared with the Department; accountability and responsibility is a key element of providing services in order to measure impact and make any necessary adjustments.

Financial Payment Proposals

We agree with the introduction of a financial payment. Families have told us that cash-first initiatives have not only benefited their children's nutritional needs but have also enabled them to enrich their family time, and are able to worry just a little bit less about the basics: *"The fund has helped as I managed to get a full food shop which really help with hungry kids and the holiday. I was also able to get most school supplies, and it really took the pressure of this summer where we can enjoy little days out with the money that would of went on that stuff...and we are truly thankful and grateful"* (Recipient of the Barnardo's Child Poverty Fund)

We would like to see the Clause 1 be amended to include a flexible payment system to account for parents, carers, and families who do not have access to a bank account. This will ensure that every eligible child will receive the financial payment, particularly children who are experience homelessness, children and families seeking sanctuary, and other barriers to opening a bank account.

We also want to take this opportunity to advocate for introducing auto-enrolment for free school meals to ensure all children who are entitled are registered and receiving free school meals. A 2022 study by Impact on Urban Health found that for every £1 invested into free school meals would see £1.71 generated in core benefits, including increased cost savings to schools, increased NHS savings, and increased food savings for families¹. According to NISRA 2024/2025 statistics, uptake level for free school meals by entitled pupils in Northern Ireland is 80.8%, which means that 19.2% of entitled children are not claiming their statutory right to a free school meal². There are many reasons for why children are not receiving free school meals:

- The application forms are complex and not accessible
- Some parents and carers may not be aware of their eligibility.
- Some parents and carers may face additional language barriers

¹ <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FSM-Executive-Summary.pdf>

² <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/DEstatistics/school-meals-statistical-bulletin-202425.html#7> List of tables and charts

- Social stigma around free school meals.
- The onus is on parents and carers to navigate the application and registration process, which does not account for familial circumstances such as work, childcare, etc.

Advice NI and Feeding Britain produced a report this year which outlines the precedent for auto-enrolment across the rest of the UK and how this could operate in practise in Northern Ireland³.

Auto-enrolment in free school meals would guarantee registration and in turn increase the likelihood of greater uptake of free school meals. This would also ensure that children will not further miss out on supports through this holiday meals payment bill, as auto-enrolment would ensure that children entitled to free school meals would also receive the proposed holiday meal payment.

³ <https://www.adviceni.net/policy/publications/automatic-enrolment-free-school-meals>