A photograph of a single red apple with some yellowing, resting on a stack of several books. The background is a dark, textured grey.

# HOLIDAY HUNGER EVIDENCE SESSION

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MAY 2017

All Party Group on Children &  
Young People

**CiNI**

Children **in** Northern Ireland

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# Introduction

There are over 100,000 children on free school meals in Northern Ireland.

The premise behind free school meals is that children from low income families have access to a hot nutritional lunch. Indeed, some even avail of the many breakfast clubs that schools have set up. But who fills that gap during the long summer holidays?

The All-Party Group on Children and Young People chaired by Steven Agnew MLA, have taken the lead by holding an evidence session on holiday hunger in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings, Stormont on 15th June 2017.

The evidence presented was clear, families are struggling to feed their children during school holidays.



# 12

Twelve organisations provided evidence either on the day or submitted responses electronically.

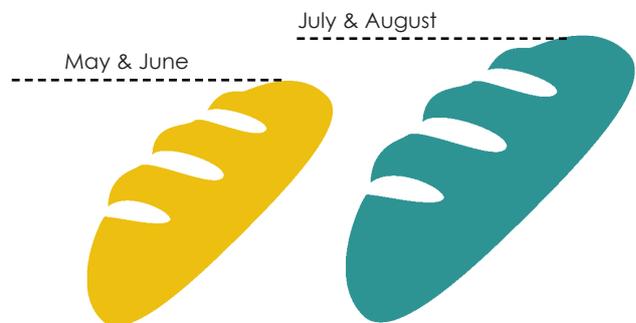
## Holiday Hunger Figures & Real-Life Pressures

While we are not in a position to report an exact figure on how many children experience holiday hunger, the evidence presented by Lindsay Fergus from The Detail drew a conclusion that more than 100,000 children who are on free school meals could be at risk of going without food during the school holidays. That equates to more than one in four school age children being at risk of hunger during the school holidays.

The Trussell Trust confirmed a spike in those using foodbanks, that in Northern Ireland during July and August there was a 17% increase compared to May and June.

Christian's Against Poverty (CAP) highlighted that meals are often seen as a flexible item of expenditure, skipping meals is common with 68% of parents who have availed of help from CAP reporting that they were unable to cater for their children's needs and a further 13% reporting that they were unable to provide their children with three meals per day.

**17% increase** in food bank use over summer



The above suggests we are dealing with two different types of hunger, hunger that parents face from skipping meals and hunger during school holidays when parents are unable to step in and provide a hot nutritious meal that children would get in school if they are entitled to free school meals.

Oasis Youth in Portadown highlighted the impact of holiday hunger with children turning up at their summer schemes asking for food with some asking to take some home with them because of the lack of food in the house caused by financial constraints.

The pressure on families during school holidays is borne out by the information submitted by SPACE in Newry. Parents told them of their reduced income during this period because of term-time contracts, while others – especially lone parents – reduced their hours to deal with childcare.

An additional cost for families during school holidays is finding suitable childcare. This can be extremely problematic especially for those on low incomes. Employers for Childcare focused their submission on the costs of childcare and their annual Childcare Cost Survey highlighting that “to date 46% of respondents have had to cut back on other household expense in order to meet childcare costs.” Comments from families included cutting back on groceries, buying less fruit and vegetables, parents going without breakfast and lunch to put food on the table for their children.

The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership has 28 Locality Planning Groups working across Northern Ireland. Locality groups are partnerships of front-line staff from all organisations across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors in the local area, together with children, young people and families. Over fifteen of the twenty eight (54%) have reported that families are experiencing the effects of poverty and economic hardship in local communities which has affected their physical, social and mental wellbeing.

The Locality Group in East Belfast provided evidence to suggest families have growing concerns about the impacts that universal credit, income tax, housing issues and welfare reform will bring. A poverty working group of the East Belfast Locality Planning Group has been established to support families and reduce isolation and stress.

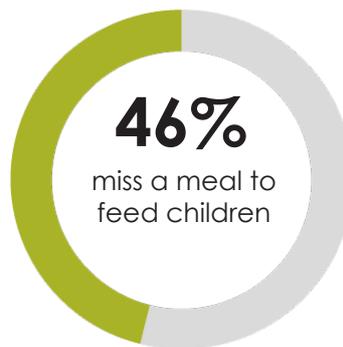
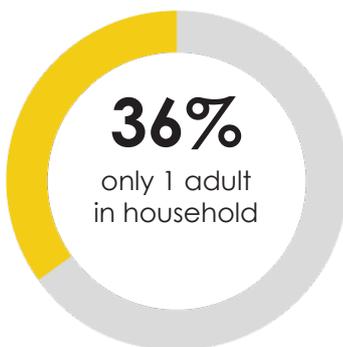
## Children with Disabilities

The Family Fund conducted a survey of parents of children with disabilities. From a response of 110, the Family Fund reported that just over a third (36%) of respondents only had one adult in their household. Of these, just under three-quarters had two or more children living with them and just over a quarter were raising two or more disabled children.

79% of families responded saying they had found it difficult to afford healthy food either ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ in the last 12 months, with almost half (46%) of parents/carers or their partners reporting having to miss a meal, in order to prioritise feeding their children.

Parents/carers cited many reasons for this, primarily around the cost of healthy food options on a budget, especially if a child had special dietary and/or sensory needs and/or food intolerances. Respondents to the survey reported seeking cheaper but less healthy/filling food, often linked to tiredness and the time needed for other caring responsibilities.

Almost eight out of 10 families (79%) were concerned about being able to afford healthy food during school holidays, with a high proportion of respondents saying that the key reasons were that their children normally had free school meals or that having the family at home increased their bills.



## Lack of Nutrition

Families with low incomes are likely to be surviving on cheap food which lacks the nutritional elements needed for growing children. The Public Health Agency noted the benefits of children receiving a free school meal:

- It helps maintain healthy weight
- Promotes wellbeing by improving mood, energy, and self-esteem
- Boosts concentration and performance at school
- Increases attainment and reduce days off sick
- Reduces the risk of ill-health now and in the future, e.g. heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes

A clear indication of this problem comes from the submission by Oasis Youth. Highlighting children turning up to their summer scheme with dry bread and no fillings while others had lunches consisting of crisps or chocolate bars and even some children arriving with no lunch at all.

A nutrition summer programme run through the East Belfast Community Development

Agency highlighted another aspect of dealing with holiday hunger in their programmes was “educating parents on nutrition and the benefits of fruit, allows a knock-on effect which was very beneficial to children’s health and wellbeing.”

The Children & Young People’s Strategic Partnership’s Ballymoney Locality Planning Group identified that obesity in children, young people and parents is a growing concern in the area. Recent engagements have demonstrated that young people from low income families are experiencing unhealthy food choices and a lack of exercise of which evidence has suggested is contributing to holiday hunger in this area.

Year 8 pupils of a post primary school have participated in a Healthy Lifestyles Pilot Programme with the Traditional Conservation Volunteers, which enabled them to plan and develop their own vegetable beds as well as growing vegetables. Fourteen Year 8 pupils also had the opportunity to participate in a steering group to ensure user engagement & involvement was central to the project.

## Learning Loss & Life Chances

Research conducted in England and Wales found that children who suffer from holiday hunger are likely to suffer the most severe effects of ‘learning loss’ which is cumulative year on year. Their concentration levels deteriorate and take the longest amount of time to readjust to school after holidays.

The Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership provided evidence of their work with Children in Northern Ireland in addressing this learning loss. The collaboration – providing food, activities and educational opportunities was noted as a way of what works.

Children in Northern Ireland work with key

partners from statutory bodies and the community and voluntary sector providing an innovative solution to end holiday hunger. Pathways Activities summarised this work in the delivery of a pilot project in Kilkeel during 2016 and a project in Portadown.

The programme is an opportunity for a partnership approach to address the growing concern of holiday hunger but also involves a range of physical and team building activities, Make Lunch sessions and an OCN accredited award in Healthy Living.

## Inactivity and social isolation

While some children can go on trips and summer holidays with the rest of their family, evidence presented highlighted that some children become less active and socially isolated during school holidays.

SPACE provided evidence that children and their families found the cost of leisure activities prohibitive while some families with children who have a disability miss the routine and social engagement of school. One rural mother with a disability who has two teenage sons highlighted how stressful summer was and how her children often become withdrawn and in low mood due to the lack of interaction or social activity they would normally get during school. The mother was unable to pay for activities for her teenagers during the summer due to a low income.

The Public Health Agency highlighted the need for physical activity and how important it is for children's growth and development. Noting the Young People's Behaviour and Attitudes study which showed that only 12.7% of 11-16 year olds met the guidelines for physical activity.

Oasis Youth echoed the concern by highlighting the additional barriers facing children from minority ethnic families in relation to reduced support networks such as grandparents.

Crucially, the case for statutory organisations to become involved to facilitate a working model to address holiday hunger was presented by the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership. A Holiday Hunger Task and Finish Group has been established to develop a model which will make the delivery of holiday hunger programmes more viable with the potential to reach all. The Task and Finish group involves the community and voluntary sector, the statutory sector and local government.



**12.7%**  
of 11-16 year olds met  
the guidelines for  
physical activity

## Summary

Poverty gives rise to many families experiencing many complex issues however, the evidence presented suggests that families are particularly vulnerable during school holidays. Comments from parents who completed The Family Fund survey cited examples of several teenage children who ate more as a consequence of typical adolescent development, and the challenges this raised in meeting the additional costs as children get older.

The long school holidays in NI places additional demands on family budgets for those on low incomes – from food, fuel, activities and childcare.

The All Party Group on Children & Young People encourage The Executive to adopt the following:

- **A statutory requirement to facilitate and coordinate the delivery of free meals and activities including accredited qualifications, for children during school holidays. The voluntary and community sector should take the lead wherever possible.**
- **Adequate funding to enable the voluntary and community sector to meet local holiday hunger needs.**
- **Protect and enhance the Free School Meals criteria and introduce free Universal Infant School meals in Northern Ireland, as is the case in England.**

## Those who provided evidence:

- Andrew McCreery & Gordon Woolsey, Community Intercultural Programme, Portadown
- Caroline Bloomfield, Health & Social Wellbeing Improvement Senior Manager (Belfast & South-Eastern Area), Public Health Agency
- Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership
- Christians Against Poverty
- East Belfast Community Development Agency
- Employers for Childcare
- Fionnuala McAndrew, Director of Social Care & Children, Health & Social Care Board
- Jacinta Linden, Chief Executive & Allison Slater, Operations Manager, SPACE Newry
- Lindsay Fergus, The Detail
- Neal White, Youth Engagement & Events Manager, Pathway Adventure Activities
- St Vincent de Paul
- The Family Fund

## Members of the All Party Group on Children and Young People:

- Steven Agnew, Green Party, Chairperson
- Chris Lyttle, Alliance Party, Vice-Chairperson
- Roy Beggs, Ulster Unionist Party, Secretary
- Nichola Mallon, SDLP, Treasurer
- Kellie Armstrong, Alliance Party
- Clare Bailey, Green Party
- Paula Bradley, Democratic Unionist Party
- Mark Durkan, SLDP
- Carla Lockhart, Democratic Unionist Party
- Daniel McCrossan, SDLP
- Mike Nesbitt, Ulster Unionist Party