



Evidence to All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger

Introduction

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its member organisations providing policy, information, training, and participation support services to members in their direct work with and for children and young people. CiNI membership also includes colleagues in the children's statutory sector, recognising that the best outcomes for children and young people are increasingly achieved working in partnership with all those who are committed to improving the lives of children and young people in NI.

Setting the Scene

More than 100,000 children in Northern Ireland are living in poverty - and the number is on the rise. Figures in the Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin have revealed that twenty-five percent of children were living in poverty in the year 2014/15. This is an increase compared to 23% on the previous year.

Targets to deal with child and family poverty are being missed due to the failure of action from the Northern Ireland Executive before and more so after its collapse.

It is our view that the Child Poverty Strategy has been shelved with no strategy or action plan to replace it.

Moreover, Northern Ireland suffers from a very high rate of economic inactivity (27.4% of the working age population compared to UK average of 22.3%) which has been a longstanding problem in Northern Ireland

due to the number of people with caring responsibilities, complex medical problems, and high levels of mental health problems largely as a result of the legacy of the conflict. It is also the case that half of all children in poverty live in households where someone is in paid work.

Furthermore, in Northern Ireland, there is an absence of a childcare infrastructure to support parents to be able to get into work, education, or training. In the context of welfare reform, the success of universal credit depends upon childcare infrastructure being in place to support parents to find work. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland lacks such an infrastructure.

Research conducted by Save the Children shows that many low-income mothers are considering leaving work because they can no longer afford childcare.¹ According to research by Employers for Childcare Charitable Group, families in Northern Ireland are paying on average £168 per week, or £8,736 per year. Most worryingly many are reaching for high interest payday loans just to cover the costs of childcare.² Recent changes to the tax credit systems mean the childcare element of working tax credit has reduced from 80% to 70%.

Another example of the lack of actions is in relation to children with disabilities who are more likely to experience poverty than their non-disabled peers. It is estimated that 57% of disabled children are living in poverty compared to 37% of children without disabilities.³

Without question, educational inequalities within Northern Ireland are stark. Northern Ireland suffers from longstanding educational inequality. A substantial proportion of people aged 16-64 has few or no formal qualifications (29.1 per cent in 2011) compared to England and Wales (15

¹Whitham, G. (2012) 'Ending Child Poverty: Ensuring Universal Credit supports working mums', Save the Children

²Dennison, R. (2016) *Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2016*, Employers for Childcare

³Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance Manifesto 2012

per cent). There are significant gaps in the education system which have been caused by chronic underfunding of services as well as other contributory factors.

A report issued by Dawn Purvis and the Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant working class⁴ suggested that funding priorities are '*back to front*'. It highlighted that '*accumulated evidence suggests that the more we invest in young people early, the better the outcome. Proportionately too little is invested in the early years during key stages of a child's development*'.

From as early as 22 months of age, children of well-off parents are already 14 percentage points higher up the scale of educational development than children of working class parents.⁵

Holiday Hunger Pilot Project Kilkeel

Many families are struggling to cope with the high cost of rising energy bills, food, and the burden of unmanageable debt. A report by Save the Children⁶ looked at 5,000 families with incomes of up to £30,000 a year and found that to ensure their children get enough food to eat, nearly two-thirds of parents skip meals, go into debt, avoid paying bills and put off replacing worn-out clothing. While families in Northern Ireland are struggling to feed their children day to day, during school holidays this becomes an even bigger problem. School holidays – particularly the summer period - within Northern Ireland are extremely long (8 weeks).

The Child Poverty Action Group, together with the British Youth Council, Kidsclub and NUT carried out a survey and focus groups with 400 young people

⁴Dawn Purvis and the Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class (2011) Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class *A Call to Action*

⁵ Beneath the Surface – Child Poverty in Northern Ireland (2013)

⁶ G Whitham, Ending Child Poverty: Ensuring Universal Credit Supports Working Mums, Save the Children UK, 2012, <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/EndingChild-Poverty.pdf>

across the income spectrum and asked them about the cost of going to school and what it means for their education. The findings confirm those of smaller scale qualitative research⁷ carried out in Northern Ireland and across the UK.

The survey found that many young people went hungry during the school day: one in four. 25% of students on Free School Meals (FSM); more than half of low-income students; and more than one in ten of the students who did not identify as low income (described from here as “better-off”) said that they were going hungry and unable to concentrate at school because they could not afford to eat. More than half (57%) of low-income students and more than a quarter (28%) of “better off” students said they missed school trips because they were too expensive. For young people from low income families, it exacerbated their feeling of social exclusion within school.

Based on the evidence above, Children in Northern Ireland decided to run a pilot holiday hunger programme to support families during the summer months. Aimed at reducing the cumulative impact of issues for children in disadvantaged areas as a direct result of long school breaks the project aimed to ensure that young people involved could:

- Identify healthy food choices.
- Develop a range of cooking skills on a budget.
- Develop the skills and confidence to communicate.
- Improve their knowledge and skills to exercise to improve their health.
- Improve their knowledge of health issues affecting young people.

⁷ P Nolan, Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report, Community Relations Council, 2014, p. 92 & Ridge, Childhood poverty and social exclusion: From a child’s perspective, Bristol: Policy Press, 2002; G Horgan, The Impact of Poverty on Young Children’s Experience of School, JRF, York, 2007; G Horgan, Speaking Out Against Poverty: voices of children living in disadvantaged areas, University of Ulster, Save The Children, Belfast, 2009

- Improve their skills and confidence to engage with and interact with others.
- Develop skills in identifying personal growth.
- Acquire an OCN Level 1 Award in Healthy Living

Recruitment on the programme sought to allocate spaces to young people in the Newry and Mourne locality with a focus on families in need of additional support during the summer months, who had been in contact with the Family Support Hub and were in receipt of free school meals.

A total of 15 young people registered for the pilot programme, the analysis of the evaluation found the following outcomes had been achieved.

OUTCOMES

- Improved mental health and wellbeing for young people
- Improved nutrition during summer holidays
- Improved educational achievement and no loss of educational memory
- Increased confidence and skills
- Reduced poor health through nutrition and exercise
- Improved employment prospects and progression (OCN qualification)
- Potential to reduce anti-social behaviour in the summer
- Higher levels of social interaction and participation
- Increased confidence, health, and wellbeing

Conclusion

Our vision going forward is to continue supporting families and children during the long school holidays but also to influence policy development to ensure that children continue to be fed when not in school.

If you require further information, please get in touch. Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence on this important topic.

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