



PPR input to the Department of Education's Review of Free School Meals and Uniform Grant Eligibility Criteria

7 February 2025

With this consultation, the Department of Education said it was seeking views on “how the eligibility criteria for free school meals (FSM) and uniform grants (UG) in Northern Ireland could change to allow more pupils to access these supports.”

According to a 2023 [report](#) on hunger in NI from the Trussell Trust, an estimated 158,000 people – 7% of the overall NI population – required support from food banks to meet their food needs (p. 12). Families with children under 16 were reportedly over-represented amongst this group: despite making up just one third of the overall NI population, they comprised 48% of people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network (p. 29).

Updated Trussell Trust [figures for 2024](#) estimated that 200,000 people in NI were facing hunger and hardship; 62,000 of them were children.

Unlike England, Scotland and Wales, which have universal free school meals for certain age groups¹, NI's current system sets eligibility criteria for students to receive them. The NI criteria include that parents are in receipt of certain named benefits²; or that they are an asylum seeker supported by the Home Office Support Assessment Team; or that their child has a statement of special educational needs requiring a special diet.

In 2023/24, around 94,000 NI pupils were eligible for free school meals. In June 2024 the Education Minister Paul Givan raised the income threshold for eligibility amongst households in receipt of Universal Credit, leading to an expected drop in eligible recipients to 93,400 in 2024/25 and 88,700 in 2025/26 ([consultation document p. 4](#)).

Previously, In March 2023, NI's **holiday meals programme** for low income families – which had provided a grant of £27 per fortnight, per child, during school holidays, to eligible low income households where children are entitled to Free School Meals – was [scrapped](#) by the Department for Education, with devastating impacts on struggling families. We call for this programme to be reinstated as a matter of urgency.

¹ England has universal free school meals for the equivalent of P1 through P3; Scotland for P1 through P5; and Wales, for all primary students ([consultation document p. 9](#)).

² Income Support, Income-Based Job Seeker's Allowance, Guarantee Element of State Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit / Working Tax Credit (taxable income cap of £16,190), Universal Credit (net earnings cap of £15,000)

The international human rights framework, which applies in Northern Ireland by virtue of the UK's ratification of both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (in 1991) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (in 1976), sets out standards which govern the actions of States Parties with respect to food poverty, food insecurity and an adequate standard of living. It requires that adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is available and accessible without discrimination and particularly notes the importance of this during the period of children and young people's physical and mental development. Further, it imposes the obligation that States Parties take all available steps to ensure these rights to the maximum available resources, and that any regression in these rights must be justified and if required must be implemented without discrimination.

It is clear that the Minister's decision to raise the income threshold for eligibility for free school meals, and the earlier decision to scrap the holiday hunger fund, are regressive steps, which should be reconsidered as a matter of urgency.

In line with the [campaign](#) led by UNISON, NI's largest union which represents thousands of education support services workers, we [call for universal nutritious free school meals](#) for all children, to benefit children's health and development and to help address the impact of child poverty.

On 12 November 2024 MLAs passed a [resolution](#) in Stormont

That this Assembly notes with grave concern the significant impact of holiday hunger and the high cost of school uniforms and [PE](#) kits on families across [Northern Ireland](#); further notes that during the absence of a functioning Executive, funding for the school holiday food grant scheme, which provided payments to prevent holiday hunger for around 100,000 children and young people, was withdrawn; expresses concern over the continued lack of action to address these issues, including completing the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants, despite the restoration of the Executive; recognises that the ongoing rise in the cost of living, including the high cost of school uniforms, is pushing many families beyond the brink; and calls on the [Minister](#) of Education to provide an urgent update on the steps his Department is taking to tackle holiday hunger; and further calls on the Minister to develop a plan to widen access to Free School Meals, to introduce a statutory cap on total school uniform costs, to remove branded items as a compulsory element of school PE kits, and to provide additional support for the extra uniform costs for children with special educational needs or disabilities.

We further reiterate the calls in that motion for a **statutory cap on total school uniform costs**, the **removal of branded items** from compulsory PE kits, and **additional support for uniform costs** for children with special needs.