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## Children in Northern Ireland’s Submission to call for written submissions by United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Children in Northern Ireland is happy for our submission to appear on the OHCHR website. Our submission is focused on child poverty.

**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.

**Child Poverty in Northern Ireland**

More than 90,000 children in Northern Ireland are living in poverty. While there has been a slight decrease from the previous year significant targets to deal with child and family poverty are continually being missed due to the failure of action from the Northern Ireland Executive before and more so after its collapse of government in Northern Ireland.

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. Northern Ireland’s last childcare strategy was in 1999. A draft strategy was issues for consultation in 2016 but since the collapse of the government it has not been implemented.

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]](#footnote-1)

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.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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 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.

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.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Food Insecurity**

We are secretariat to the All-Party Group on Children and Young People. We held an evidence on food insecurity in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings, Stormont on June 2017.

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

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

**Food Insecurity Figures and Real-Life Pressures**

While we are not in a position to report an exact figure on how many children experience food insecurity/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 summer 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.

The above suggests we are dealing with two different types of hunger/food insecurity, 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 increasingly 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 another 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 locally to support families and reduce isolation and stress for families.

**Children with Disabilities and Food Insecurity**

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 from low income families 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 has identified that obesity of 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.

**Inactivity and social isolation**

While some children can go on trips and summer holidays with the rest of their family, evidence presented 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 prohibited 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 teenager’s 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. Nothing the Young People’s Behaviour and Attitudes study 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 like grandparents.

**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 places additional demands on family budgets for those on low incomes – from food, fuel, activities and childcare.

Children in Northern Ireland is working with key partners from statutory bodies and the community and voluntary sector providing an innovative solution to end food insecurity and holiday hunger. This is through our Gets Active programme which are set up for children and young people to provide food, fun and a learning element which will help address child poverty.

**Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)** Unit 9, 40 Montgomery Road Belfast BT6 9HL **Tel:** 028 9040 1290 **Fax:** 028 9070 9418 **Email:** info@ci-ni.org.uk Children in Northern Ireland

1. Whitham, G. (2012) ‘Ending Child Poverty: Ensuring Universal Credit supports working mums’, Save the Children [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance Manifesto (2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Beneath the Surface – Child Poverty in Northern Ireland (2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)