

June 2026



VIEWS ON THE EDUCATION  
(HOLIDAY MEAL PAYMENTS) BILL

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## Background

The Youth Assembly was established in June 2021. The current 90 Youth Assembly Members took their seats in November 2025. At the time of recruitment, they were in school years 9-12 which is approximately age 12-16. They are a diverse group. Membership includes young people from every constituency and recruitment was designed to ensure proportionate representation of Section 75 categories such as gender, religious background, race, care experience, sexuality, disability, and young people with caring responsibilities.

The Youth Assembly was established to perform three functions:

- To engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically with Assembly Committees on legislation and inquiries relevant to young people;
- To undertake project work generated by the three Youth Assembly committees; and
- To enable consultation with government Departments and to participate in youth voice projects.

In May 2026, the Youth Assembly was invited to provide evidence to the Committee for Education on the *Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill*. Youth Assembly Members met online with Danny Baker MLA on 19 May 2026 to consider the Bill, and this report summarises the views of Youth Assembly Members. Members will give formal evidence to the Committee at their meeting on 24 June 2026. As part of their preparation, Members also reviewed Official Reports<sup>1</sup> and Minutes of Proceedings<sup>2</sup> of the Committee for Education, alongside the Bill Paper<sup>3</sup> produced by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe). This helped to build a fuller understanding of both the scale of the issue and the key policy considerations arising during legislative scrutiny.

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, *Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill: Department of Education*, Official Report (Hansard), 15 April, 29 April and 6 May 2026, [Minutes of Evidence](#)

<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 15 April 2026, 29 April 2026 and 6 May 2026, [Committee for Education - Minutes of Proceedings](#)

<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service, *The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill 2026* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly, April 2026), NIAR 114-2026, [Assembly Research and Information Service Research Paper - The Education \(Holiday Meal Payments\) Bill 2026](#)

The Youth Assembly were particularly keen to give evidence on this Bill, because it aligns with existing Youth Assembly priorities. In February 2026, the Youth Assembly established three committees: Rights & Equality, Health, and Education. The Youth Assembly Education Committee is currently undertaking a research project examining the cost of education for families, including the financial pressures associated with school life. Through this work, Members have engaged with expert evidence and stakeholder perspectives, which consistently identify the rising cost of essentials, including school meals, uniforms, and transport, as the most significant financial challenges facing parents. This has highlighted the extent to which increasing costs can impact access to education and contribute to wider inequalities, with particular concern raised about the affordability of food for children both during term time and school holidays. The Youth Assembly Education Committee will publish their findings on this project in June 2027 and meet with relevant decision makers to present this research.

The Youth Assembly wishes to express their thanks to Danny Baker MLA, the Committee for Education, and officials for the opportunity to share their views on this issue.

# Young People’s Views on the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

## Introduction

On Tuesday 19 May 2026, the Youth Assembly met online to discuss the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill, which is currently being scrutinised by the Assembly’s Committee for Education Committee. There were 27 Youth Assembly Members on the call. Members were able to contribute their views in a number of ways: by speaking during the session, posting comments in the Microsoft Teams chat function, responding to a series of closed questions through a Mentimeter poll, or submitting additional comments by email after the meeting. This approach was designed to ensure that all Members had the opportunity to contribute in a way that suited them.

The map below shows that Youth Assembly Members joined the session from across Northern Ireland, reflecting a broad geographical spread. This distribution provided the session with perspectives from young people living in a variety of settings, including cities, towns, and rural communities across Northern Ireland.



Figure 1: Where are you joining from? Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026

Members had been provided with a short summary explaining the Private Members' Bill in advance of the meeting. This summary is presented in Appendix One.

Danny Baker MLA opened the session by outlining the Bill. He explained that it is informed by his own lived experience and by concerns about rising child poverty, highlighting that many children return to school hungry and unable to learn, particularly after longer breaks such as the summer holiday period.

Following this introduction, Members asked a range of questions that focused on both the practical details and wider implications of the Bill. Several questions explored how the scheme would work in practice, including how much money pupils currently receive for free school meals, inconsistencies in pricing across schools, and whether the proposed payments would apply to all age groups each year.

They also sought clarification on key concepts and context and raised concerns about whether free school meals themselves are sufficient, alongside wider hidden costs of education. Some questions addressed who would benefit, highlighting concerns about those just above eligibility thresholds.

After Mr Baker had responded to the questions, participants were invited to share their views based on what they had heard in the discussion, read in the materials distributed prior to the meeting, and reflected on from their own lived experiences. This was facilitated through a Mentimeter quiz, which provided a structured way to gather feedback, capture anonymous opinions, and encourage participation from all young people.

The questions from the Mentimeter quiz are detailed below, followed by a summary of the responses provided by the Youth Assembly Members.

## Have you ever seen or heard of young people struggling to access enough food during school holidays?

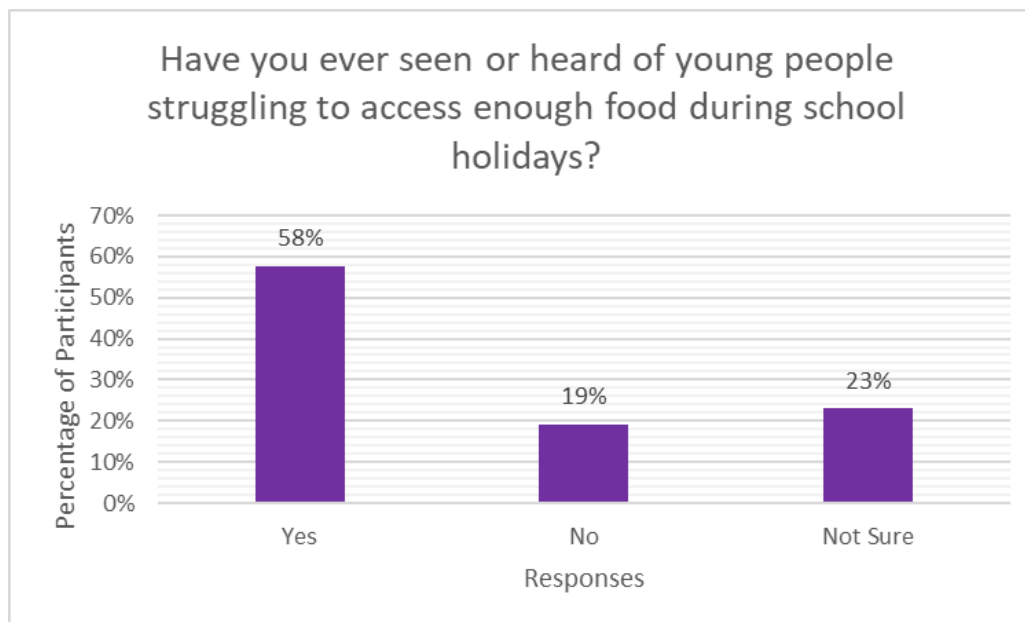


Figure 2: Have you ever seen or heard of young people struggling to access enough food during school holidays? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Question 1 asked Members whether they had ever seen or heard of young people struggling to access enough food during school holidays. The Mentimeter responses indicate that a majority of participants were aware of this issue, with 58% of respondents said they had seen or heard of young people struggling to access enough food during school holidays, while 19% said they had not, and 23% were unsure.

When invited to share their experiences, Members described a range of personal and observed situations that highlight the reality of food poverty. Several participants spoke about friends or peers who struggle to access enough food, including one who described a friend “*making a pot of food to last them over many days,*” while another noted that some young people may rely on very limited options such as “*a pot noodle for more than a day.*” Others highlighted how poverty can be visible in school, with one Member noting they were aware of “*people in my school who visibly struggle with hunger.*”

Some contributors also shared their own lived experiences, including periods where there was little or no food available at home, or difficulties accessing shops due to location or financial

constraints. A number of responses pointed to wider issues of stigma and inequality, such as bullying linked to family circumstances or the challenges faced by those just above eligibility thresholds for support. Others pointed to the wider normalisation of food insecurity in some communities, with one participant reflecting that it has “*become a bit of a norm*” in some working-class areas.

In addition, participants recognised the role of community supports such as foodbanks, while also noting that not everyone has access to these services, particularly in more rural areas. Even among those who had not personally experienced or witnessed food insecurity, there was a clear awareness that it is a significant and widespread issue.

Overall, the responses demonstrate that food insecurity during school holidays is a real and pressing concern for many young people, with both direct experiences and strong awareness of its impact within their communities.

### How fair do you think it is that free school meals stop during the holidays?

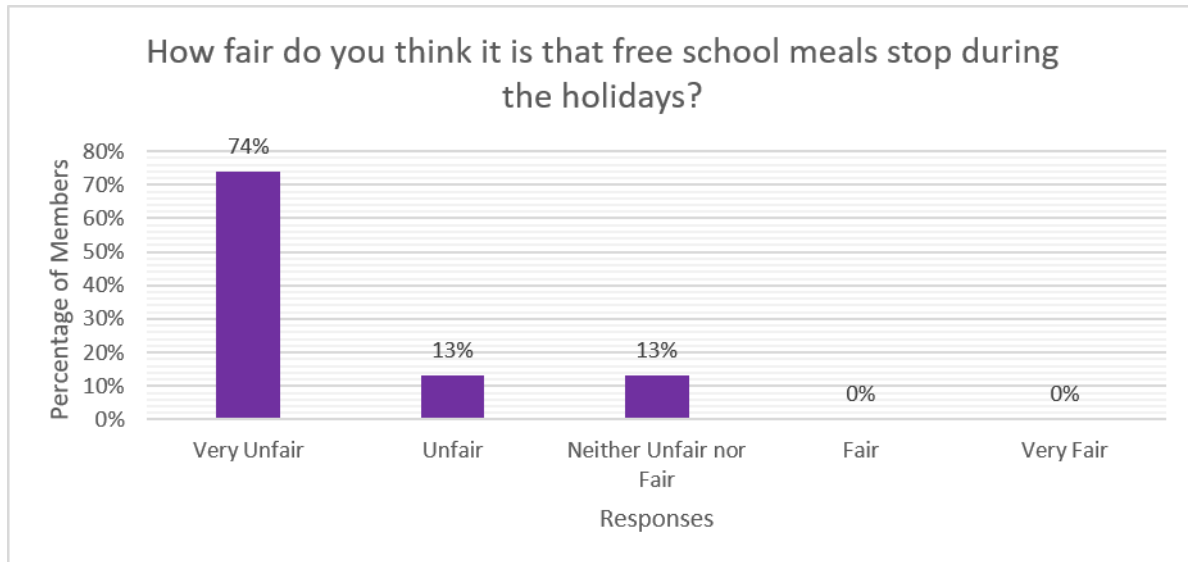


Figure 3: How fair do you think it is that free school meals stop during the holidays? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Question 2 asked Members how fair they think it is that free school meal support stops during the school holidays. 74% of participants said this is very unfair, a further 13% said unfair, and 13% selected neither unfair nor fair. Notably, no respondents felt that the current situation is

fair. This indicates a clear view among young people that removing support during holidays does not reflect the ongoing needs of children and families.

In discussion, Members consistently emphasised that the need for food does not stop when school closes. As one participant stated, “*Just because kids are off school doesn’t mean they don’t have to eat.*” Many highlighted that holidays can actually increase financial pressure on families, as parents may face reduced income due to childcare responsibilities while also needing to provide additional meals at home. This was described as a “*snowball effect,*” where costs build up and place further strain on households.

Young people also raised concerns about access and barriers to alternative support, particularly food banks. Some felt that that a referral or voucher system could make access difficult, particularly in smaller or rural communities, while others described feelings of embarrassment or stigma associated with seeking help. One participant explained that “*it would be quite embarrassing sometimes for people to go out to food banks,*” while another suggested that the process could be described as “*humiliating.*”

Participants also pointed to wider inequalities, including the challenges faced by families who may struggle to afford food, transport, or childcare during holidays. There was a strong sense that the current system does not adequately account for these realities, particularly for larger families or those already on low incomes and the ‘working poor’.

## What would be the best way to provide support to families during the holidays?



Figure 4: What would be the best way to provide support to families during the holidays? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Question 3 asked Members what they felt would be the best way to provide support to families during the holidays. The responses demonstrate a clear preference for direct financial support, as shown by the 58% of participants selecting cash payments for families as the best option, compared to 25% who preferred free meals or food programmes and 17% who selected vouchers. No participants felt that support should not be provided.

In discussion, Members emphasised the importance of flexibility and choice. Many felt that cash payments would allow families to better meet individual needs, particularly in relation to dietary requirements, allergies, and personal preferences. As one participant explained, “*I would pick a cash payment because it's easier and you can choose what you want based on your allergies or choices.*” Others highlighted the limitations of other approaches, noting that food provision may not always be suitable or appealing, with one Member commenting that they would not want to rely on “*a cold ham and cheese sandwich... when there's an option to get cash.*”

Concerns were also raised about a voucher scheme, with participants pointing out that they can be restrictive and inconsistent in value or usability. Some Members highlighted that vouchers may only be accepted in certain shops or for specific items, which can limit families' ability to respond to their own needs and circumstances. Participants also noted that voucher

schemes can vary in value and availability, which they felt could lead to unequal experiences for families. Others pointed to challenges in delivering alternative models, particularly in rural areas where access to services or transport may be limited.

Evidence presented in the RaISe report<sup>4</sup> suggested that stigma can act as a barrier to accessing food-based support and highlighted that direct payments may offer a more discreet form of assistance, potentially increasing uptake among eligible families. This aligns with Youth Assembly concerns that vouchers or visible forms of support could increase stigma, whereas cash payments were seen as more private and accessible.

Youth Assembly Members suggested that cash payments were viewed as a more efficient and workable solution, with one Member suggesting that *“it doesn’t need to be perfect... it just needs to work, and it needs to be effective.”*

However, some participants did raise additional considerations, including the need to ensure families have the means to prepare food at home, such as access to heating. There were also suggestions that free meal programmes could play a role if delivered effectively, for example through schools or community settings.

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service, *The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill 2026* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly, April 2026), NIAR 114-2026, [Assembly Research and Information Service Research Paper - The Education \(Holiday Meal Payments\) Bill 2026](#)

## Should families be trusted to use payments in a way that supports children?

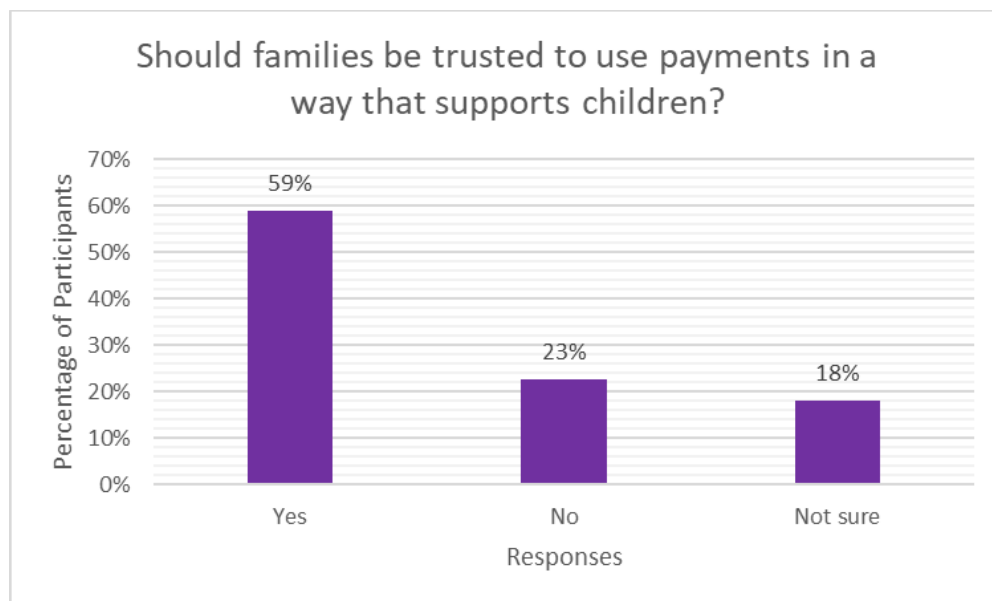


Figure 5: Should families be trusted to use payments in a way that supports children? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Question 4 asked Members whether families should be trusted to use payments in a way that supports children. Responses to this question showed a more nuanced set of views. 59% of Members felt that families should be trusted, emphasising that in most cases, parents can and should be trusted to prioritise their children’s needs. As one participant stated, *“I feel like feeding children should be pretty high on the list of priorities,”* while another added that *“we should trust the parents because obviously they’re going to try and feed their children. But even if someone does abuse it, we shouldn’t cancel it. Just because one person does it, it shouldn’t ruin it for everyone else.”*

However, some participants raised concerns based on their own experiences of inequality within communities. 23% of Members did not think families should be trusted, with one Member reflecting that, *“it depends on the family, you don’t know what type of family it is. It could be a family where the family has addictions, or one that neglects their children.”*

In response to these concerns, several Members suggested that safeguarding should be addressed through existing support systems rather than restricting access for all. For example, participants noted that where there are concerns about misuse, *“that is a whole other problem*

for social services to deal with,” and that targeted intervention or additional support may be more appropriate in those cases.

## The money for this scheme would come from the Department of Education’s budget. What do you think about that?

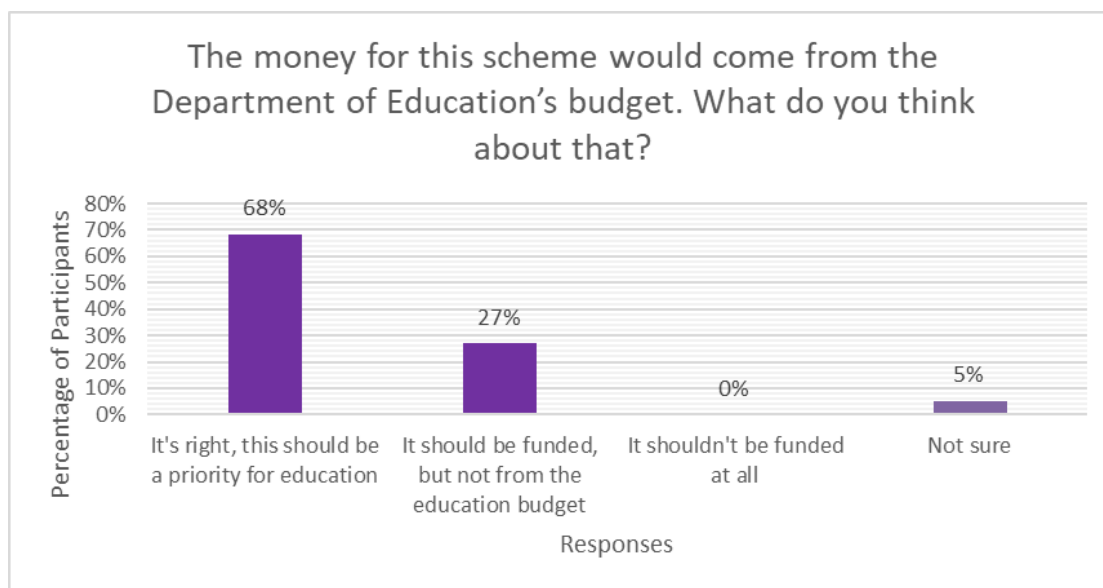


Figure 6: The money for this scheme would come from the Department of Education’s budget. What do you think about that? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Question 5 asked Members for their views on the proposal that funding for the scheme would come from the Department of Education’s budget. Responses generally indicated support for this approach, with 68% of participants agreeing that this funding is right and should be a priority for education, while 27% felt the scheme should be funded but not from the education budget. A small minority (5%) were unsure.

In discussion, Members linked access to food with the ability to learn, arguing that supporting children’s basic needs should be seen as part of the Department of Education’s role. As one participant stated, “How can kids be expected to learn if they can’t eat?” while another emphasised that “if you have no food, you can’t learn so the education department should care about young people.” These views reflect a clear understanding among participants that hunger directly impacts educational outcomes. This perspective also aligns with the UN

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>5</sup>, which recognises children’s rights to adequate nutrition and an adequate standard of living (Article 27), the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24), and access to education (Article 28), all of which are interconnected.

Members were aware that this issue has been raised during legislative scrutiny of the Bill. Department of Education officials highlighted concerns about the financial implications, noting that the scheme could create a significant recurring cost, estimated at over £20 million per year, which would need to be met from within the Department’s existing budget, potentially impacting other areas of expenditure. Some of the Youth Assembly Members also expressed concerns about pressures on the education budget, and suggested that if the Department of education was unable to fund the proposal, then responsibility for funding could potentially be shared across government departments. Under the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015<sup>6</sup>, government departments have a statutory duty to work together to improve outcomes for children. Holiday hunger is a clear cross-cutting issue affecting health, education and wellbeing. Introducing free school meals during school holidays would represent a practical, preventative and collaborative response in line with the Act’s aims.

The Departments of Education, Communities and Health could jointly fund and deliver a holiday meals programme. Local councils and the Education Authority could help deliver it on the ground.

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<sup>5</sup> [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), Articles 24, 27 and 28, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> [Children’s Services Co-operation Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#)

## If money is limited, should this be a priority?

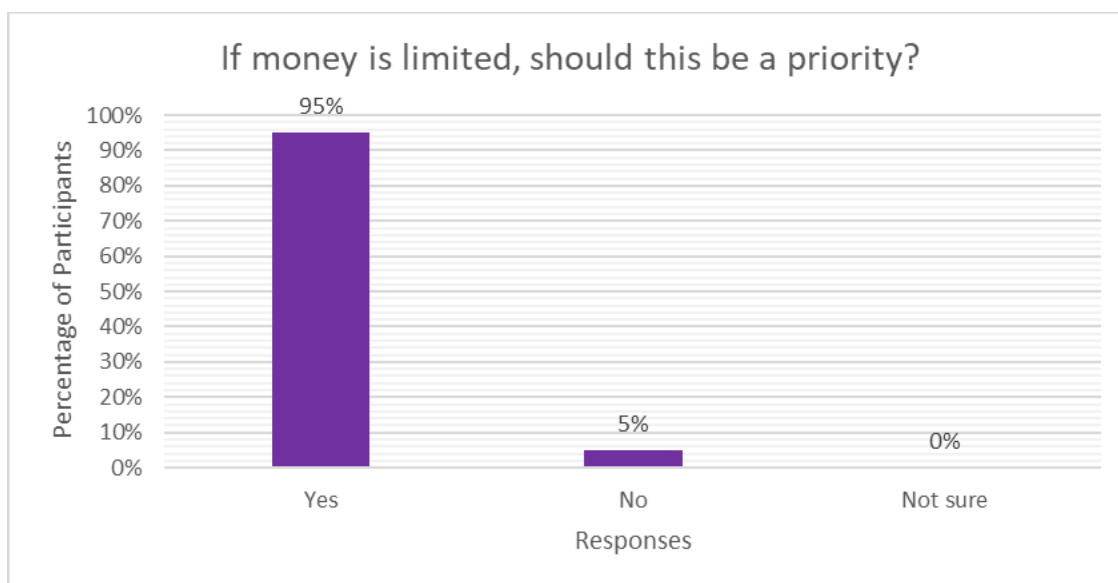


Figure 7: If money is limited, should this be a priority? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Question 7 asked Members whether, if money is limited, this Bill should still be a priority. 95% of participants said that it should be a priority, while only 5% of Members selected 'no' as a response. Members emphasised that access to food is a human right and should be prioritised above other areas of spending.

## If you could change one thing in this Bill to make it better for young people, what would it be?

Question 8 asked Members what changes they would make to the Bill to improve it for young people. Responses demonstrated that many of the Members wanted the Bill to go further, particularly in expanding access and increasing support. The most common suggestion was the introduction of universal free school meals. Related to this, many participants raised concerns about the current threshold for free school meal eligibility. Members suggested that more families who are struggling should be able to access support, with calls to “let more people... get free school meals” and to “discuss the cut-off point.”

In highlighting these issues, some Members pointed to examples elsewhere where provision has already been expanded. For example, in Scotland, all children in primary school years Primary 1 to Primary 5 are entitled to free school meals during term time regardless of household income, reflecting a more universal approach to provision.<sup>7</sup> This was seen by Members as a potential model for reducing stigma and ensuring that support reaches a wider group of children who may be experiencing financial pressure but do not meet eligibility thresholds. Some Members also proposed extending support beyond holiday periods to include weekends or after-school provision, recognising that food insecurity is not limited to school holidays.

### Overall, should the Assembly pass the Bill?

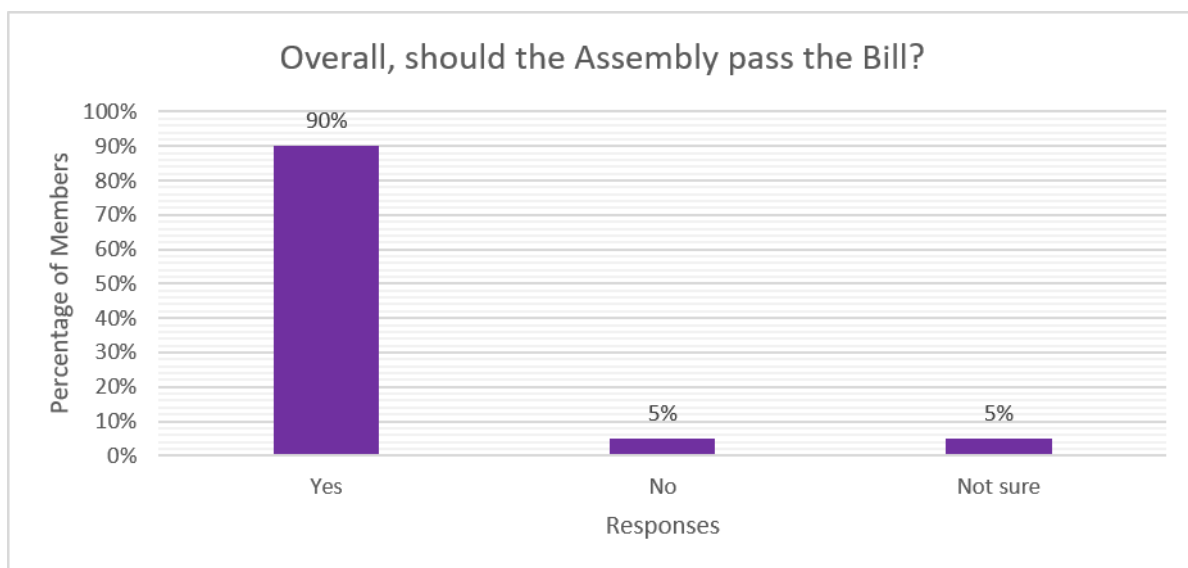


Figure 8: Overall, should the Assembly pass the Bill? (Youth Assembly Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

The final question asked Members whether the Assembly should pass the Bill. Responses show strong overall support for the Bill, with 90% of Members arguing that it should be passed. This high level of support aligns with earlier responses, where Members strongly recognised the impact of food insecurity on children’s wellbeing and education, and the need for action to

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government, “Primary School Meals,” accessed 16 June 2026, <https://www.mygov.scot/primary-school-meals>

address this. While some participants noted areas where the Bill might be amended or expanded particularly around eligibility, scope, and funding, there was a broad consensus that it represents an important and necessary step to improve the lives of children in Northern Ireland.

## Conclusion

The findings from this consultation demonstrate that Youth Assembly Members are highly aware of the issue of holiday hunger and its impact on young people across Northern Ireland. Many participants shared direct experiences or observations of food insecurity, reinforcing evidence already presented to the Committee for Education which highlights the scale of the issue and its consequences for children's wellbeing and educational outcomes. Members consistently emphasised that access to food is a basic right and an ongoing need that does not stop during school holidays.

Members' views reflect a clear children's rights perspective. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises children's rights to an adequate standard of living, including access to nutritious food (Article 27), the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24), and the right to education (Article 28). Participants' emphasis on the link between hunger and learning demonstrates a strong understanding that these rights are interconnected, and that a failure to address food insecurity risks undermining children's ability to fully access education and thrive.

There was a consensus that it is unfair for free school meal support to end during holiday periods, particularly given the additional financial pressures faced by families during these times. Members also demonstrated an awareness of the wider structural issues associated with food poverty, including stigma, rural isolation, and the limitations of current eligibility thresholds. In terms of how support should be delivered, Members consistently favoured cash payments, highlighting their flexibility and ability to reduce stigma. This reflects wider policy debates, where different delivery mechanisms, including vouchers and alternative food provision, have been explored. While some participants raised concerns about misuse, the majority emphasised the importance of trusting families, echoing broader discussions about how best to balance safeguards with dignity and effectiveness.

Members also engaged constructively with the financial context of the Bill. While many supported prioritising this issue within the education budget, others suggested that holiday hunger should be a cross cutting issue. In this context, the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, provides a clear framework for joint working across government.

Holiday hunger affects education, health and wellbeing, and Members identified the potential for a more collaborative, cross-departmental approach involving the Departments of Education, Communities and Health, alongside delivery partners such as local councils and the Education Authority.

While there was broad support for the Bill, many Members felt that it could go further, particularly by expanding eligibility and moving towards more universal provision over time. In highlighting this, Members pointed to approaches taken elsewhere. For example, in Scotland, universal free school meals are available to all children in Primary 1 to Primary 5, demonstrating how a broader entitlement can reduce stigma and ensure that support reaches a wider group of children experiencing financial pressure. This was viewed by participants as a potential model for future development in Northern Ireland.

Overall, Youth Assembly Members expressed strong support for the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill, viewing it as an important and necessary step towards addressing a clearly evidenced social need. However, they also highlighted opportunities to strengthen the Bill through a rights-based, collaborative and more inclusive approach. Their views align closely with the key themes emerging from Committee scrutiny and research evidence, and provide a valuable, informed contribution to the Assembly's consideration of how best to ensure that no child goes hungry during school holidays.

## Appendix One: Youth Friendly Summary – Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

Tell me more about the...



# Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill

This Bill is about making sure young people who get free school meals don't go hungry during school holidays. Right now, free school meals stop when school closes. This Bill wants to change that, by giving families money during holidays.

If the Bill becomes law, families of children who already receive free school meals will receive money during the school holidays. The money will go straight into their parent's bank account, and would be roughly the same as what school meals would normally cost.

### How would it work?

Payments would be made to families during the **main school holidays**, such as summer, Christmas, Easter and mid-term breaks, so that support continues even when schools are closed. The money would go **directly into a parent's bank account** and would be equal to the typical cost of school meals.

Responsibility for delivering the payments would sit with the **Education Authority**, who would organise the scheme and keep records, while the **Department of Education** would oversee funding and set the rules. Overall, the scheme is expected to cost around **£20–£23 million per year**.

Evidence shows that food poverty increases during the school holidays, with some families turning to food banks and children going without regular meals. By providing financial support year-round, the Bill aims to reduce "holiday hunger," help tackle child poverty, and ensure young people have the nutrition they need to stay healthy, learn effectively, and reach their full potential.

### What do MLAs think about the Bill?

There are mixed views on the Bill. Supporters argue that it tackles real hunger faced by children during school holidays, when around 90,000 young people lose access to free school meals. They say this lack of food can affect health, learning and future outcomes, and point out that a similar scheme previously helped families. Many also see it as a moral issue about children's rights and believe the cost is reasonable if it is prioritised.

However, those against the Bill argue that holiday hunger should be dealt with through the welfare system rather than the education budget. They raise concerns about the cost, warning it could take money away from other important services like special educational needs and youth provision. Some also question whether cash payments would always be used for food, and argue that the Bill focuses on symptoms of poverty rather than addressing its root causes.

The Bill passed Second Stage. Now it's been sent to the Education Committee, who will examine it in detail, ask questions, hear evidence, and suggest any changes before it moves forward.

