

## Tackling Holiday Hunger in Ireland

*'Children do not stop eating during holidays and thus a huge burden is placed upon parents financially to provide food all day long' - Principal of a primary school in Limerick City in receipt of grant under Children's Rights Alliance Christmas Food Poverty Initiative*

### Introduction

**The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 150 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children by making sure their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides that every child has the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical health, and governments have an obligation to combat disease and malnutrition through the provision of adequate nutritious food.<sup>1</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that in implementing this right, providing food in school is 'desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day', and recommends that this is combined with education on nutrition and health.<sup>2</sup>

A healthy diet is out-of-reach for families with inadequate disposable incomes with food costs rising as children grow older.<sup>3</sup>

The proportion of income spent on a healthy diet is higher in Ireland for those in receipt of social welfare versus those in employment.<sup>3</sup> Overall, low-income households need to spend between 13 and 35 per cent of their net income to afford a minimum healthy food basket.<sup>4</sup> Food costs make up the largest component of a household's budget for families with children and the rise in inflation over the course of the last year or two has only exacerbated this.<sup>5</sup> One of the primary mechanisms that has been used in Ireland to tackle children's experience of food poverty is the provision of school meals. There has been significant investment in expanding the School Meals Programme, and

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1 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 24.

3 UNCRC General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24) CRC/C/GC/15, para 46.

4 A McGloin via Safe Food, *Cost of a healthy food basket in Ireland?* (Safefood 2023)

<<https://www.safefood.net/communications/news/2023/food-basket-ire-2023>> accessed 12 March 2024.

4 A McGloin via Safe Food, *Cost of a healthy food basket in Ireland?* (Safefood 2023)

<<https://www.safefood.net/communications/news/2023/food-basket-ire-2023>> accessed 12 March 2024.

5 *ibid.*

particularly the provision of hot school meals, in the past number of budgets. Budget 2023 allocated €94.4 million for the programme with an additional €14.5 million allocated in February 2023.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 1,700 schools and organisations are participating in the programme, with 300,000 children benefitting.<sup>7</sup> Further investment in Budget 2024, of €42.5 million, will expand coverage to non-DEIS primary schools from April 2024.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is a gap in provision when schools are closed for holiday periods meaning that many children and young people are at a greater risk of food poverty or in experiencing ‘holiday hunger’. Through our engagement with our members, particularly through the provision of grants to tackle food poverty, we know that there is a consistent and demonstrated need to address this gap in provision and that what is needed is a long-term, sustainable solution. In Budget 2025 the Children’s Rights Alliance are calling on the government to:

- Develop and fund a pilot initiative for the expansion of school meals during holiday time by leveraging existing community infrastructure, and relationships between schools and summer camps. [Cost: €1 million].

## Food Poverty amongst Children and Young People in Ireland

Food poverty is defined as the inability to have an adequate or nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility.<sup>9</sup> Food poverty is multidimensional; encompassing a lack of access to a nutritionally adequate diet and how this impacts health and social participation.<sup>10</sup>

The latest figures from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) show that in 2023 21.4 per cent of children were living in deprivation.<sup>11</sup> This means that they were unable to access two or more items from a list of 11 which are otherwise considered the norm for society.<sup>12</sup> Amongst these are a number of food-related indicators including affordability measures such as being able to afford a roast once a week and a meal with meat or a vegetarian alternative every second day, along with measures related to the social aspects of food such as having friends or family over for a meal. In 2023, 4.2 per cent of children could not have a roast dinner once a week, while 1.6 per cent are unable to afford a meal with meat or a vegetarian alternative every second day.<sup>13</sup>

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6 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 14 December 2023 [55945/23].

7 *ibid.*

8 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2024 Expenditure Report*, (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform 2023), 143.

9 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2018?* (Safe Food 2019)

10 *ibid.*

11 CSO, ‘SIA69 – Poverty Rates’ (CSO 2024) <<https://data.cso.ie/table/SIA69>> accessed 12 March 2023

12 CSO, ‘Enforced Deprivation - Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023’ (CSO 2024) <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/enforceddeprivation/>> accessed 12 March 2023.

13 CSO, ‘SIA132 - Type of Deprivation Item Experienced’ (CSO 2024) <<https://data.cso.ie/table/SIA132>> accessed 12 March 2024.

Children of lone parent families are significantly more likely to experience deprivation. For example, 7.5 per cent of single-parent families are unable to afford a roast once a week.<sup>14</sup> This is in comparison to 4.2 per cent for two-parent families.<sup>15</sup>

Children who grow up experiencing food poverty often experience a long-term impact.<sup>16</sup> Barnardos reported that of the people who witness children experiencing food poverty first-hand, 74 per cent noted a negative impact on the child's physical development and 70 per cent noticed the negative impact on the child's social and emotional development.<sup>17</sup> Children's education and their ability to maintain relationships is also affected.<sup>18</sup> Food Poverty is understood to affect children's physical health as well, with one study referring to obesity as a form of malnutrition.<sup>19</sup> Another article outlines that the eating habits of those living in food poverty can lead to obesity; such as skipping meals, eating high-calorie foods, and eating when food is available rather than when they are hungry<sup>20</sup> Growing Up in Ireland data found that children in lower socio-economic groups experience higher overweight and obesity rates than their advantaged peers.<sup>21</sup>

The use of the phrase 'Holiday Hunger' first appeared in the UK in 1909.<sup>22</sup> Essentially the phenomenon refers to a situation whereby 'economically disadvantaged households with school-aged children experience food insecurity during the school holidays'.<sup>23</sup> Many stakeholders are concerned about the gap in provision of meals outside of school term, particularly with regard to exam time and holiday periods and how this is compounded by wider issues.<sup>24</sup> Although it is not a new phenomenon, thousands of children in Ireland are still at risk of Holiday Hunger.<sup>25</sup> This lack of school meal provision in holiday periods means that many children go hungry.<sup>26</sup>

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14 CSO, 'Enforced Deprivation - Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023' (CSO 2024) <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/enforceddeprivation/>> accessed 12 March 2023.  
15 *ibid.*

16 UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, *Innocenti Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*, (UNICEF Innocenti 2023) 21.

17 Barnardos, 'Child Food Poverty 2022' (Barnardos 2022) <<https://www.barnardos.ie/news/2022/february/child-food-poverty>> accessed 6 March 2024.

18 *ibid.*

19 D Carvajal-Aldaz, G Cucalon, and C Ordonez, 'Food Insecurity as a Risk Factor for Obesity: A Review' (Frontiers in Nutrition 2022) <<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnut.2022.1012734/full>>

20 K. Tariq, 'Why Food Deprivation in Childhood is Linked to Obesity' (The Conversation, 2023) <<https://theconversation.com/why-food-deprivation-in-childhood-is-linked-to-obesity-193183>> accessed 2 April 2024.

21 Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Infant Cohort (At 3 Years) No. 4 Children's Physical Growth from Birth to Age 3 (DCYA 2013).

22 A Connolly via M Long, M Defeyter, P Stretesky, *Holiday Hunger in the UK: Local Responses to Childhood Food Insecurity*, (Routledge 2021) 3.

23 *ibid.* 11

24 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 110.

25 T Ward 'Food poverty over the Christmas period' (Irish Times 2023) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/2022/12/14/food-poverty-over-the-christmas-period/>> accessed 6 March 2024.

26 Food Cycle, 'What is Holiday Hunger?' (Food Cycle 2022) <<https://foodcycle.org.uk/what-is-holiday-hunger/>> accessed 6 March 2024.

### Children's Rights Alliance Food Poverty Grants

The Children's Rights Alliance's work on the issue of food poverty includes a practical programme element whereby, through the generosity of our donors, we provide grants to our members to tackle holiday hunger. Since 2022, the Alliance has run five separate funding initiatives, awarded 71 separate grants, and distributed over €650,000 in funding.

In our most recent programme, in December 2023, 35 projects were funded with almost €298,000. This funding resulted in at least 7,906 children and 3,559 families being supported in the run up to and during the Christmas holiday period. When reporting back on the scheme, 91 per cent of recipients said they had seen an increase in need over the holiday period.

## Cross-Government Responses to Food Poverty

The establishment of the Food Poverty Working Group chaired by Minister Joe O'Brien T.D is the primary mechanism to drive cross government action on food poverty.<sup>27</sup> To date the group has mapped out the resources available to address food poverty, including government programmes, supports, and services<sup>28</sup> along with initiating a pilot case work approach to addressing food poverty.<sup>29</sup> The group has also commissioned research to examine the prevalence and drivers of food poverty.<sup>30</sup>

Alongside the Working Group there has been significant progress in expanding the reach of the school meals programme and in particular the provision of a hot school meal.

In March 2023, a report on the *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* was published.<sup>31</sup> Amongst the key findings highlighted by the evaluation is the issue of holiday hunger. The report notes that this phenomenon is compounded by external factors such as the cost of living and other challenges that disadvantaged families face in Irish society. In considering the role that schools could play in addressing this issue, the evaluation notes that logistical issues such as provision of alarm codes and keys to access the school building have already needed to be overcome in the delivery of school meals. Therefore, schools could form part of the options to address this issue. However, the report notes that the issue of Holiday Hunger is an issue that requires a 'broader Government response' that any decision on how to address holiday hunger would have to 'align with the Working Group on Food Poverty'<sup>32</sup> and Amongst the report's short term to medium term improvements, to be delivered by 2025, there is a call to 'extend a modified version of the School Meals Programme to beyond term time to address holiday hunger'.<sup>33</sup>

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27 Department of Social Protection 'Minister O'Brien Announces New Working Group on Food Poverty' (Department of Social Protection 2021) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4f450-minister-obrien-announces-new-working-group-on-food-poverty/>> accessed 19 March 2024.

28 Department of Social Protection 'Minister O'Brien welcomes publication of the Report on Food Poverty – Government programmes, schemes and supports' (Department of Social Protection 2022) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/919b8-minister-obrien-welcomes-publication-of-the-report-on-food-poverty-government-programmes-schemes-and-supports/>> accessed 19 March 2024.

29 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

30 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

31 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 113.

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.* 7.

## Spotlight on International Examples

It is welcome that the School Meals Programme evaluation recommends expanding this initiative to holiday period. However, there may also be other existing mechanisms operating in the community, particularly during holiday periods, that may ensure that those most impacted by holiday hunger are reached. In the text boxes below are examples of how Holiday Hunger is being addressed in Wales and in Massachusetts in the United States.

### **Summer Eats | Massachusetts, USA**

'Summer Eats' is the colloquial name for the Summer Food Service Programme (SFSP) in Massachusetts, USA.<sup>34</sup> The SFSP is one of two programmes in the national summer nutrition programmes which works to provide free meals and snacks to children who would otherwise be without.<sup>35</sup> SFSP is available in 'areas in which 50 per cent or more of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals'.<sup>36</sup> Summer Eats operates at different sites across the State where children can avail of a free meal that has been prepared on-site or delivered to the site.<sup>37</sup> The sites are reimbursed for meal costs, including operating and administration costs.<sup>38</sup> Currently, the state holds a contract with Project Bread, a non-profit organisation that runs the programme.<sup>39</sup> The State of Massachusetts is slightly larger in population than that of Ireland, making it appropriate for comparison. The use of civil society organisations to work distributing the meals is potentially replicable in Ireland and is an alternative to using schools and school staff as part of a pilot programme. In line with the *Evaluation's* observation that 'all participants agreed that any food provision during the holidays would need to be targeted at the most deprived children',<sup>40</sup> the Summer Eats programme is available in areas most in need. Although this may not be suitable in the long-term, an Irish pilot that targets children most affected by Holiday Hunger in a similar way to Summer Eats would be appropriate.

### **Playworks Holiday Project | Wales**

The Playworks Holiday Project is a Holiday Hunger initiative by the Welsh Government. It aims to increase access to play opportunities and healthy food for children during the school holidays.<sup>41</sup> Although specifically a Holiday Hunger initiative, the incorporation of access to play tackles the social isolation element of food poverty; 'playing can shield children from the negative aspects of poverty, helping them to develop their inner resources and build resilience'.<sup>42</sup> The project is to be carried out by local authorities, and participants' access to the project is to be free or no more than £1. The provision of food is also to be for all participants in order to 'avoid any stigmatisation'.<sup>43</sup>

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34 B Turpin, *Child Nutrition Programs: Massachusetts and Beyond* (Project Bread 2022) 21

<[https://www.hungercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Child\\_Nutrition\\_Programs\\_Massachusetts\\_Beyond\\_Blake\\_Turpin\\_PB.pdf](https://www.hungercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Child_Nutrition_Programs_Massachusetts_Beyond_Blake_Turpin_PB.pdf)> accessed 12 March 2024.

35 *ibid.* 18

36 *ibid.* 19

37 *ibid.*

38 *ibid.* 20

39 *ibid.* 21

40 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 7.

41 Welsh Government, *Playworks Holiday Project 2024-2025* (Welsh Government 2023) 3

<<https://www.gov.wales/playworks-holiday-project-2024-2025-guidance-local-authorities>> accessed 12 March 2024.

42 *ibid.* 2

43 *ibid.* 4

## Recommendations

While a scheme to tackle holiday hunger has not been developed to date in Ireland, an innovative approach to tackling food poverty is currently being rolled out by the Department of Social Protection.

In Budget 2023, an allocation of €400,000 in funding was secured to develop and implement a pilot case work model to address food poverty. To support the delivery of this pilot programme a Request for Tender was issued seeking applications from organisations to provide a case worker support service in four geographic areas across Ireland. Following an evaluation of the responses to the tender, the pilot programme commenced in three areas in September 2023. The programme will be implemented over a period of 18 months. As part of the rollout of the pilot the Department of Social Protection receives quarterly data reports as mechanism of monitoring the programme's rollout. An evaluation of the pilot will be used to inform future policy initiatives in this area.<sup>44</sup>

Adopting a similar approach to this, a pilot holiday hunger programme could be developed and overseen by the Food Poverty Working Group. Oversight from this group could help to encourage innovative responses that use existing community infrastructure including but not limited to schools. For example, in Wales the Playworks Holiday Project not only addresses holiday hunger but also provides children with the opportunity to take part in play. This groups can facilitate a wider government perspective which may help to identify the most impactful way of addressing holiday hunger could be identified.<sup>45</sup>

Building on the cross-government approach adopted by the Food Poverty Working Group and drawing from international best practises, Ireland can develop solutions to tackle Holiday Hunger, and reduce the nutritional, social, and financial impacts of food poverty over the school holidays.

- Develop and fund a pilot initiative for the expansion of school meals during holiday time by leveraging existing community infrastructure, and relationships between schools and summer camps. [Cost: €1 million].

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<sup>44</sup> Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

<sup>45</sup> RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 122.