

The Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland



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Table of Acronyms

ASQ-SE	Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social and Emotional
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
CiNI	Children in Northern Ireland
COSMO	Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities
CRC	Committee on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CYP	Children and Young People
DE	Department for the Economy
DENI	Department of Education Northern Ireland
DfE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
DoH	Department of Health
EA	Education Authority
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EITP	Early Intervention Transformation Programme
EOTAS	Education Otherwise Than At School

EQIA	Equality Impact Assessment
ES	Extended Schools
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
ETI	Education Training Inspectorate
EWTS	Emotional Wellbeing Teams in School
EYFSP	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile
FSME	Free School Meal Entitlement
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights
IFA	Irish Football Association
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
MHST	Mental Health Support Team
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

OFCOM	Office of Communications
OFMDFM	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PEG	Parent Engagement Group
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
QUB	Queen's University Belfast
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SEP	School Enhancement Programme
SLD	Specific Learning Disabilities
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UU	Ulster University

Executive Summary

This report is intended to support colleagues working in education and with communities across Northern Ireland (NI) in responding to the severe budget cuts which they face. It is also intended to inform the general public of the cumulative impact of the ongoing cuts and to warn public representatives, officials and the UK and Irish Governments of the far-reaching societal impact of this sudden imposition of austerity measures on education provision in NI. The team of authors each address specific issues within our own areas of academic expertise, but as a collective we make the case for ending the reliance on civil servants to make policy decisions, reversing the cuts that have already been made, halting further cuts and urging those in public office to provide enhanced protection for section 75 groups, protected by the equality provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, who will be most affected by this sudden shift in public policy.

The picture painted by our report is unremittingly bleak. Overall spending per pupil for school-aged children in NI is falling behind the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. This is before any account is taken of the inflationary pressures facing education providers in NI, or the societal factors and legacies of conflict which affect the provision of education here. Amid the collapse of power sharing these swingeing cuts are being imposed by civil servants with minimal input from the UK Government, and little say from NI's own elected representatives. This is a subversion of the principle of political accountability in a parliamentary democracy, put in place to keep the day-to-day running of NI off the Westminster agenda and preventing the full functioning of the consultative requirements with Ireland under Strand 3 of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998. It also undermines the operation of public sector equality duties. Throughout the report we draw upon the recommendations provided in *A Fair Start* (Department of Education NI, 2021), which the policy of cuts undermines, and the educational rights highlighted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The sections of our report which address the impact of specific cuts on education provision begin with an analysis of how the changes put in place by the Department of Education (DENI) entrench educational disadvantage. The short-term savings which are made by cutting programmes to tackle educational disadvantage are likely to be dwarfed by the costs which will be generated in the long run. The removal of, or deep cuts to, schemes such as those to alleviate holiday hunger, period poverty and the high costs of school uniforms have a cumulative impact on groups which are already disadvantaged, in terms of their experience of education provision. This is particularly problematic in light of the shortcomings in the operation of public sector equality protections.

We then address the impact of cuts in light of specific educational challenges. Societal mental health and wellbeing issues in NI have a profound impact upon education, and service provision both in schools and in youth groups is being subject to deep and sudden cuts, when the operation of programmes such as Happy Healthy Minds have yet to be properly evaluated. Furthermore, when research points to the significance of early years development and the effectiveness of shared family reading, the removal of funding from the Book Start Baby scheme provides a gratuitous example of an intervention which prioritises a limited short-term saving and which sees provision in NI fall far short of other parts of the UK. Although the DENI has explicitly recognised the importance of Early Years policy and ring-fenced provisions such as Sure Start, after months of uncertainty, this is an area of provision in which officials are attempting to maintain provision in NI when it should be being expanded.

The impact of cuts upon minority ethnic communities in NI has been largely overlooked in general discussion of these policy changes. This is an inevitable feature of such groups having limited

representation within political processes, compounded by the attenuation of political oversight around these cuts. Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision has long been overstretched in NI and notwithstanding the DENI's efforts to protect provision in this area from the full force of cuts, the upheaval involved in finding budget savings on the scale demanded by the UK Government is distracting from the need for an overhaul of this provision.

In the final chapters of this report we address how the cuts impact upon NI's educational infrastructure. We highlight how the sudden imposition of what amounts to a severe squeeze on most capital spending is impacting upon an existing maintenance backlog affecting educational institutions. This places additional pressure on school fundraising efforts to address these shortfalls, meaning that schools outside disadvantaged areas have much greater opportunity to bridge this gap. But educational infrastructure extends beyond the schools estate. Digital devices are essential to ensuring meaningful participation in education today, meaning that the removal of funding from the Digital Devices Scheme will have a devastating impact upon educational engagement and attainment for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

NI's future is in the hands of our Children and Young People (CYP). Only by providing all of them with the education which they deserve will we ensure that we can meet the great societal challenges that are yet to come, setting us on a path to prosperity and equal opportunity for all in our society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The Secretary of State must provide guidance on proposed cuts on a departmental level, in light of consultation with the Irish Government, which should respond to full public consultation on these proposals. These should precede any significant changes to open-ended programmes being run by the Department of Education NI.**
- 2. In the absence of direct ministerial authorisation for decisions, the Department of Education NI should seek clarification from the Secretary of State on how they should take account of the recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its decision-making processes.**
- 3. A suite of funding for early intervention and further sustained support should be reviewed and, in light of that review, reinstated and supplemented to address educational disadvantage as a result of socio-economic factors. Short sighted cuts and 'savings' made during these formative years will ultimately result in further and greater public spending to address the resultant societal issues in the future.**
- 4. The Holiday Hunger Scheme, Free Period Products Scheme and support for school uniform costs are vital interventions recognising genuine needs in order to mitigate socio-economic barriers to participation in education. These schemes should be immediately reinstated or have full funding restored.**
- 5. Evaluation of the Happy Healthy Minds programme should be expedited to ensure that the interventions delivered have an evidence-base of positive outcomes, and to preclude ineffective programmes and those with potentially negative outcomes. Funding should be prioritised for early intervention and prevention programmes, and also those that involve capacity building and wellbeing support for school staff. This should include the introduction of Emotional Wellbeing Teams in School, and further rollout of the Education Authority's School Staff Wellbeing Project.**

- 6. The Book Start Baby scheme should be reinstated to ensure that access to learning resources and parent support is equitable across the constituent parts of the UK.**
- 7. Continue to prioritise and invest in Early interventions, where the evidence shows you get the biggest impact. This should be supported through investment in the graduate workforce to support children and families who are most vulnerable in the early years. Investment in Sure Start should be increased and made sustainable to widen the reach to meet those who are educationally disadvantaged.**
- 8. In assessing the impact of funding reductions, the Department of Education NI should take account of the high levels of disadvantage among particular minority ethnic and migrant groups and the disproportionate effects that cuts to services are likely to have on these groups. The Department should also recognise the interlinkages between these programmes and the risk that cuts to one area of service may affect families' ability to access and engage with other services.**
- 9. The Department for Education NI should prioritise its End-to-End Review of SEN in NI, and that this would facilitate an urgent evidence-based root and branch reform of SEN policy and practice including the requisite funding to complete the Education Authority's SEND Transformation Programme as soon as possible. Following 15 years of protracted SEN review, we recommend further that ambitious SMART targets are set, monitored and reported for the delivery of real change, prioritising children's needs and improving the delivery of services by the Education Authority, health professionals, schools, Initial Teacher Education providers and others.**
- 10. The Department of Education NI should recognise the role that the learning environment plays in facilitating pupil attitudes, behaviour and attainment as well as staff retention, and that the Department of Education NI restores and extends their financial commitment to investing in the schools estate, addressing the chronic maintenance backlog and committing to an ambitious capital build programme.**
- 11. The Department of Education NI should reinstate funding for its digital devices programme as a matter of urgency to provide equitable access to online learning for all children and young people, irrespective of social background.**

Introduction

Senior civil servants have been required by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (NI) to make significant cuts to the education budget to comply with the 2023/24 budget. These cuts are being imposed against a backdrop of the collapse of NI's power-sharing Executive, which generates an accountability gap for NI citizens and their political representatives. Many of these cuts are being executed without meaningful prior public consultation, not least with the Children and Young People (CYP) who are directly impacted by them. The cuts are numerous and dramatic and will have significant consequences for those CYP who are most intensely impacted by the ongoing Cost-of-Living emergency. In line with the recommendation from the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child to withdraw the NI Budget, the cuts should be urgently reversed and a moratorium placed on any further cuts, until devolved functions are returned to the NI Executive so that decisions that affect the physical and social wellbeing of our children are made by elected representatives who are accountable to democratic institutions and to the public who elected them. Indeed, the Children's Law Centre has written to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (22 June 2023) urging him to protect children from budget cuts, otherwise, they argue, they will have no alternative but to resort to legal proceedings.

The scale and severity of the cuts prompted this 'rapid response' report by a group of academics across Ulster University (UU), Stranmillis University College, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Newcastle University. Our contribution seeks to pull together the latest evidence to increase political and public consciousness on both the short and long-term implications of the deep reductions in provision for disadvantaged CYP across a number of areas which reflect our research expertise in law, social policy, child rights, education and psychology.

Our overarching conclusion is that the cuts will increase poverty, widen existing educational achievement gaps, further exacerbate NI's mental health crisis and send Special Education Needs provision beyond the brink of collapse.

The Structure of the Report

This report provides detailed analysis of the consequences of the funding reductions and lack of investment across multiple aspects of education provision in NI. The report begins by providing the political context in which the cuts are being made, which includes a legal analysis from Murray on the governance of public sector services in the absence of a NI Executive. This is followed by an overview by Purdy of the motivations which led to the commissioning of *'A Fair Start'* and the opportunity it presents to radically reform education to ensure all children are given the best start in life, regardless of their socio-economic background. Orr emphasises that the provision of education is underpinned by human rights and, more specifically, the intrinsic relevance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Orr, Fitzpatrick and McMullen examine the consequences of the cuts for educational underachievement, children and young people (CYP) in poverty, and for mental health and wellbeing. This is followed by an examination of the implications of the cuts for our children in their formative years of development. Simms addresses the importance of early intervention and development and McCartney and McConnell provide an analysis of the difficulties thwarting the sustainable development of the Early Years sector in NI. Loader then outlines the exclusionary consequences of the cuts for minority ethnic children and young people. Purdy outlines the painfully protracted policy making process for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). SEN provision is characterised by years of chronic underinvestment to ensure equal access to education for children who have complex needs.

The last part of the report examines how school infrastructure will be affected by the cuts including the implications for creating an effective learning environment. Digital access for children and young people is discussed in the context of the removal of the digital devices scheme which demonstrated positive outcomes for disadvantaged families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on research and evidence cited in this report, the contributors have made a series of recommendations accompanying each section of the report, designed to protect children's futures and secure for them a fair chance to succeed and meet their goals.

- The Governance Crisis in Public Service Provision (Professor Colin Murray, Newcastle University)
- The Failure to Implement A Fair Start and Protect Children's Rights (Professor Noel Purdy and Dr Karen Orr (Stranmillis University College)
- Educational Underachievement (Dr Karen Orr, Stranmillis University College)
- Children and Young People who are in poverty (Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick, Ulster University)
- Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing (Dr John McMullen, Queen's University Belfast)
- Early Intervention and Development (Professor Victoria Simms, Ulster University)
- Early Years Education (Dr Suzanne McCartney and Dr Barbara McConnell, Stranmillis University College)
- Minority Ethnic Children and Young People (Dr Rebecca Loader, QUB)
- Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs (Professor Noel Purdy, Stranmillis University College)
- Educational Infrastructure (Professor Noel Purdy, Stranmillis University College)
- Digital Access for Children and Young People (Professor Noel Purdy, Stranmillis University College)

The Political Context for the Education Cuts

There has been no First Minister or deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland (NI) since February 2022. This means that the Executive Committee, composed of Departmental Ministers across Health, Communities, Infrastructure, Education, Finance, Economy and Agriculture and Environment has not met, and policy decisions that cut across portfolios and departments have not been made. In addition, funding distributed to NI through the Barnett Formula has not been allocated in accordance with devolved policy priorities. The lack of a functioning devolved government is occurring simultaneously with a period of significant economic crisis caused by inflation, which has caused the cost of essential goods and services to rise significantly. Price rises are having a disproportionate impact on the lower income households as they spend a larger proportion of their income on basics such as food, fuel, housing costs and transport (Johnson et al., 2022; ONS, 2022). This report outlines how this increased financial pressure is harming parents' and carers' ability to meet the cost of essentials that are integral to accessing education and maintaining an acceptable level of physical and mental health and wellbeing, such as food, school uniform, digital devices and participation in activities which enrich learning, including sports, music and drama both in school and outside of school through youth projects.

As well as having an impact on household finance, inflation has increased the cost of NI Departments' operating costs, estimated by the Education Authority (EA) to be in the region of £95 million (EA, 2023). HM Treasury sets a budget for NI according to the Barnett Formula and it is the responsibility of the Executive to allocate the funding. However, due to the lack of an NI Executive, the Secretary of State for NI, Chris Heaton-Harris MP, has laid down a NI budget for 2023/24. In a written statement to the House of Commons, delivered on 27 April 2023, the Secretary of State outlined that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury granted flexible repayment terms on a £297m overspend from the 2022-23 budget. In reality, this provides minimal protection for frontline public services particularly as operating costs increase. Furthermore, Senior Civil Servants have been placed in the inappropriate position of having to make significant cuts to provision with little more than ambiguous advice from the NI Office (NIO), which outlines that Departments 'must control and manage expenditure within the limits of the appropriations set out in Budget Acts' (NIO, 2023, para 10(a)).

The Department of Education (DENI) faces a hugely depleted 2023/24 allocation of £66.4 million, representing a 2.5% cut to their budget at a time when demand for services has increased, particularly for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (NI Affairs Committee, 2023). This has resulted in a funding gap of £382 million. On 1 June 2023, Dr Mark Browne, Permanent Secretary at DENI, confirmed in a letter to Party Leaders that £172 million of cuts had already been executed (Browne, 2023).

To put the scale of the cuts into perspective, during evidence at the NI Affairs Committee, Sara Long, Chief Executive of the EA said that 85% of the budget is 'staff-based' and a 'quick analysis' suggests that 6,600 whole-time equivalent redundancies would be required in order to match the scale of reductions that are demanded by the budget allocation and no voluntary exit scheme exists. Without the 'levers or ability' to do anything around staff costs, DENI and EA are forced to cut programmes and initiatives (NI Affairs Committee, 2023). The programmes and initiatives that have been cut are those that are targeted at children who are in most need and which are designed to increase access to education. Sara Long said:

'There is no doubt that the earmarked funds are targeted at those most vulnerable children. The cumulative effect and impact of that will be very pronounced. Also, the funds are targeted at mental health, wellbeing, underachievement and our most vulnerable

children. The fact that they are earmarked but are not part of schools' budgets or the Education Authority's core budget is also something that makes them less sustainable than they ought to be.'

On 1 June, Permanent Secretary for DENI, Dr Mark Browne, confirmed that he would not cut funding to youth services and a range of Early Years programmes (Pathway Fund, Sure Start, BrightStart and Toybox). Nor would he proceed with 'the full scale of proposed cuts to Extended Schools'. Dr Browne said that the rationale for this decision was based on the 'scale and cumulative impact of the proposed cuts, which represent a major change to long standing Ministerial programmes and policies' and that 'such a decision should be taken by a Minister, not a Permanent Secretary'. He also said that executing the cuts would create different budgetary pressures for the next financial year and beyond. While this roll back is very welcome, it also poses the inevitable question of why such a conclusion was reached on these particular budgetary decisions, and not the full gamut of cuts announced. A further question is whether or not the protection of Early Years provision means that there will be deeper cuts elsewhere. This raises an acute danger that marginalised communities, disengaged from consultation processes, will face even more severe cuts in other services upon which they depend, as a result of this ring fencing of Early Years provision.

The remaining cuts in Education taken together with those announced for Communities, Health, and Infrastructure will have the most detrimental impact on those children and young people (CYP) who have the least, and who require increased social investment to ensure that they have a fair chance to achieve, particularly during the Cost-of-Living emergency.

Some of the cuts, such as Free School Meal Payments ('Holiday Hunger Scheme'), the Engage programme and the Digital Devices scheme were borne out of the COVID-19 pandemic and represented crucial recognition that investment was urgently required to ensure that disadvantaged pupil's opportunities were protected. This vital protection has been removed despite the current economic crisis which is significantly compounding vulnerability to poverty and deprivation. This crisis should be viewed in the same way as the previous crisis and warrants an urgent response to ensure that no long-term harm is caused to CYP.

The cuts include:

- An end to Free School Meal Payments during holiday periods ('Holiday Hunger Scheme') which provided 96,300 children with £27 a fortnight.
- An end to Happy Healthy Minds
- An end to Engage
- An end to the Digital Devices scheme
- An end to the Baby Book scheme
- A pause on capital development
- 28 New school projects paused
- A 40% cut to Free Period Products budget
- A 50% cut to the Shared Education budget
- A reduction in Nurture funding from £70 million to £62 million
- An end to schools coaching programme run by Irish Football Association (IFA) and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)
- An end to funding available to Young Enterprise NI
- A pause on a cashless scheme for schools
- A depletion of funding available to Extended Schools (ES)
- A significant shortfall in resource for pupils with SEN

- A pause on the recruitment of school crossing patrols

Spending on Education in NI: UK Comparators

A recent report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Sibieta, 2023) notes that school spending per pupil has ‘mostly recovered back to 2010 levels across England, Wales and NI, with increases of about 8% in real terms in England and Wales between 2018–19 and 2022–23, and of 11% in NI. This leaves school spending at about £7,200 per pupil across England, Wales and NI in 2022–23’. The report adds the caveat, however, that NI is in an uncertain position in the context of the lack of agreement on teacher pay levels and the impact of budget cuts. Spend per pupil in Scotland is significantly higher than England, Wales and NI at £8,500 per pupil in 2022-23 or £1,300 higher (before the cuts being implemented in NI are taken into account).

The picture for NI is now much worse than that painted by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) a few months ago. Mark Baker, Chief Executive of Controlled Schools’ Support Council provided an updated analysis on the basis of the figures available to them and concluded that the increased spending in NI in recent years has effectively been *reversed*, with spending falling around £500 per pupil compared to England and Wales, against a backdrop of pupil numbers in NI rising by 8% between 2011–12 and 2022–23. Baker also pointed to the £2.3bn funding that the Chancellor announced in November 2022 for schools in England, which will not be allocated in NI via Barnett consequential due to the ongoing lack of power-sharing institutions, which means a loss of a further £230 per pupil (NI Affairs Committee, 2023).

Baker predicts that this could represent a £2,000 gap between what Scotland is spending per pupil compared to NI – which equates to over £30,000 in education over the course of a child’s life (NI Affairs Committee, 2023). It is also important to acknowledge that Scotland is further investing in children through the introduction of a Scottish Child Payment, a weekly payment of £25 per week for every child under 16 (entitlement is based on receipt of certain benefits) to mitigate against social security measures that impinge upon children’s rights, such as the two-child limit. This policy is directly aligned to the Scottish Government’s target of substantially reducing the number of children living in poverty by 2030. The EA has since confirmed that the basic funding (age weighted pupil unit) in NI has been frozen for 2023-24, and in the case of Primary and Nursery Schools, is £15 less per pupil than that two years ago (DENI, 2023).

The Governance Crisis in Public Services Provision

Professor Colin Murray (Newcastle University)

The Civil Service's Constitutional Role

The UK Constitution operates on the basis of a clear divide between the roles of ministers and civil servants. The Cabinet Manual (UK Government, 2011), a document detailing constitutional roles of public actors in the UK, states that the civil service 'supports the government of the day in developing and implementing its policies, and in delivering public services' and that civil servants 'are accountable to ministers' for their role in the policy and decision making process of public bodies. As the Civil Service Code (UK Government, 2015) further explains, civil servants must not 'frustrate the implementation of policies once decisions are taken by declining to take, or abstaining from, action which flows from those decisions'. This injunction, however, presupposes that such policy decisions have been taken by an accountable minister.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service is not, for historical reasons, part of what is described as the Home Civil Service, but these principles, and the unique agency of ministers to determine overarching policy which officials implement, apply equally to it. The mere fact that Northern Ireland's (NI) power sharing institutions are not functioning does not, of itself, provide a basis for civil servants stepping into the policy-making arena. As the NI Court of Appeal concluded in *Buick* (2018), decided during the 2017-2020 collapse of Stormont, 'the devolved constitutional arrangements elsewhere in the UK do not permit civil servants to act without being accountable to Ministers' and there is no inherent basis for a more extensive role in the NI context. Senior civil servants in the Executive Office have noted that an express statutory basis needs to be provided to authorise policy making by the civil service in such circumstances (Sheeran, 2022), and in light of the constitutional implications of this extraordinary role it is incumbent upon officials to use such powers only insofar as they are necessary for effective public administration.

Upending the Civil Service's Role

Following the *Buick* case, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 was enacted, enabling senior civil servants to take actions, which would ordinarily require ministerial approval, in the 'public interest' notwithstanding the absence of direct ministerial authority, until power-sharing institutions were restored in January 2020. The full restoration of institutions, however, lasted little over two years. Under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022 these special powers were restored to civil servants to tackle the latest period in which power sharing has collapsed, working under the guidance and principles provided by the Secretary of State (Murray, 2022).

Alongside this legislation the Secretary of State for NI issued overarching Guidance defining the 'public interest' and set out departmental spending limits. The UK Parliament also passed the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2023, further defining the limits on uses of public resources. The Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Act 2023 takes these special arrangements, time limited under the 2022 Act, and places them on an open-ended basis, operating for the duration of the hiatus in power sharing.

A Governance Crisis

These arrangements have required civil servants to not simply administer public services in NI in the absence of detailed direction from ministers, but instead they expect civil servants to initiate

extensive cuts to existing services to meet these budgetary constraints with only the loosest of frameworks being supplied by the Secretary of State. This state of “administrative devolution” amounts to an effort to avoid the formal imposition of direct rule in NI, with the consultation requirements with Dublin on matters which would otherwise be devolved. Under Strand 3 of the 1998 Agreement such consultation should take effect through the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, ramping up the work of its secretariat. In the absence of such arrangements there is even less ministerial input into decision making than direct rule has historically involved, and a consequent loss of accountability.

An irreducible conflict exists within the role imposed on civil servants following the enactment of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022. In the December 2022 Guidance provided by the UK Government (NIO, 2022), senior officials are informed that the ‘primary principle’ in determining whether it is in the public interest that they act without ministerial authorisation is that they ‘must control and manage expenditure within the limits of the appropriations set out in Budget Acts’ (under para 10(a)). However, this is subject to a prior statement that ‘major policy decisions’ and, specifically, ‘a major change of an existing policy, programme or scheme’, should ordinarily be left for Ministers to decide or agree (under para 9). The instruction to meet the requirements of the Budget Acts, moreover, prioritises immediate cuts, notwithstanding the long-term implications. As the following sections of this report illustrate, the resultant problems that such an approach stores up for NI are severe, which cannot be squared with the priority in the Guidance ‘to maintain the delivery of public services as sustainably, effectively, and efficiently as possible’ (under para 10(d)).

This problem is exacerbated by the Equality Act 2010 not applying to NI. Under section 149 of this statute all public authorities must have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations in their decision making. This is more broadly framed than the earlier iteration of an equality duty imposed on public authorities under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which is recognised in the Guidance to civil servants on their extraordinary role during the collapse of power sharing (and, in particular, the impact assessment requirement under Northern Ireland Act 1998, Schedule 9(4)(2)(b)). The Equality Act 2010 also sets out extensive consultation arrangements where protected characteristics could be affected by decision making. Such consultations are a necessary element of effective public policy making which takes account of protected characteristics in the allocation of public resources. Neither of these efforts to mainstream equality concerns within the practice of public bodies, however, requires that public bodies address structural inequalities, which are likely to be exacerbated by severe public sector cuts.

The Department of Education (DENI) published, on 19 June 2023, its promised Equality Impact Assessment Consultation to accompany the final budget, in light of its section 75 obligations (DENI, 2023a). It has, hitherto, been difficult to track and contribute to the operation of Equality and Human Rights Policy Screening in policy making feeding into the cuts process. Cuts to open-ended programmes and failures to roll over time-limited funding schemes for a new budgetary year have been so numerous that civil society groups have struggled to formulate effective responses. Consultations amount to little more than window dressing unless they are actively built into the decision-making process. The overlapping late-stage consultations which are underway with regard to multiple cuts do not facilitate substantive rethinking of policies in light of equality and human rights commitments.

This approach raises serious concerns as to whether the public sector duties towards promoting equality of opportunity and good relations under section 75 is being adequately addressed in the education cuts. Section 75, notwithstanding its shortcomings, is binding upon the operation of the

Northern Ireland Office (NIO), in the drafting of such a constrained budget for education in NI, just as it applies to the DENI's efforts to implement the cuts necessitated by that budget. Both are public authorities for the purpose of this provision. There was no evident public sector equality process relating to the preparation of the budget, even though it was ultimately embodied in the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2023, to address this requirement.

The Crisis Deepens

This approach to obliging the civil service to manage a limited budget, dependent upon unclear and conflicting guidance, has led to a focus on cuts to public services on discretionary and time-limited funding (as seen, for example, with the discontinuation of the healthy happy minds pilot (DENI, 2023b) and holiday-hunger payments (Meredith, 2023). As the above, and subsequent sections of this report highlight, funding for particular schemes has not been renewed when the existing funding window comes to an end, and what had been regular application schemes for grants have not been reopened. This approach to governance, based on addressing short-term budgetary demands, does not facilitate long-term planning.

The enactment of the Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Act 2023 brought with it new Guidance on the role of the NI civil service under this legislation. This new May 2023 Guidance (NIO, 2023), however, simply reproduces the tensions between the principles governing civil service activity which were so prominent within the December 2022 Guidance that it replaced. The new legislation nonetheless allows the Secretary of State to direct that consultations on proposed policy changes be carried out, which would enable more substantive changes to long term departmental commitments, moving the focus of cuts beyond discretionary and short-term funding. The civil service should ensure that such consultations precede all departmental policy changes which involve spending cuts. As the UK Supreme Court recognised in the *Moseley v London Borough of Haringey* (2014) case, existing practice by departments can generate legitimate expectations on the part of public service users, and consultations are necessary prior to policy changes in such circumstances.

This indicates that the direction of travel is to create a framework which enables more extensive decision making by civil servants, directed towards the overarching purpose of reducing public spending in the short term. These increasing demands upon the civil service store up problems for the resumption of power sharing. Following the last period of civil-service administration of NI, much of the first weeks of work of the restored Assembly, in 2020, was taken up by promulgating secondary legislation necessary to provide retroactive authority to decisions taken by civil servants. The amended powers under the 2023 Act facilitate much more extensive civil service decision making.

Alternatives to Civil-Service Administered Cuts

Direct rule, in the NI context, is problematic from the standpoint of democratic oversight, but the current form of administrative devolution or quasi direct rule generates particular challenges and leaves insufficient safeguards in place against damaging policy making affecting its communities. Ministers belonging to the major parties in Westminster, which either do not run candidates or run very limited campaigns in elections in NI, are not directly answerable to the voters of NI, and the focus upon decision making in Whitehall/Westminster provides an inadequate reflection of the constitutional aspirations of Nationalists in NI. Although the Irish Government has prioritised the resumption of power sharing as a response to NI's latest governance challenges, the current arrangements do not reflect Strand 3 of the 1998 Agreement. In circumstances where power

sharing has collapsed the remit of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference should be extended to cover all issues of governance which would ordinarily be devolved to NI's institutions.

Separate from these overarching governance issues, the inadequacies and contradictions within the current ministerial guidance, mean that civil servants are able, at a minimum, to seek specific guidance regarding proposed cuts from the Secretary of State, particularly with regard to structural changes in departmental policy. Section 3(4) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022 is not limited to the sort of guidance, provided in December 2022 and May 2023, on the level of general principles. Direct ministerial guidance should be provided with regard to the level of specific proposed policy changes and associated cuts, triggering the duty under section 3(6) of the Act for the Secretary of State to have regard to representations from NI's Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). The failure of the minister to provide such direct guidance would open up decisions to challenge on the basis of a combination of the civil service role established in *Buick* (2018) and the principle of parliamentary accountability elucidated by the UK Supreme Court in the *Miller/Cherry* (2019) case.

Conclusions

The imposition of major spending cuts through decisions made by civil servants without direct ministerial oversight runs contrary to the role of officials within the UK's system of government. Officials should not have been put in the position of performing this function with only minimal oversight from elected representatives in Westminster, with no more than indirect political accountability through the Secretary of State for NI and with limited, and indeed deficient, operation of public sector equality duties. In these circumstances, faced with conflicting guidance, civil servants in the DENI have already recognised that the task they are being asked to perform risks undermining 'all the Department's efforts to tackle educational disadvantage'. Ring fencing some schemes, however, makes the weight of cuts fall even more heavily on projects reliant upon discretionary funding and those due to be renewed. Civil servants should not impose cuts without extensive prior consultation and explicit direction from the Secretary of State on proposed departmental spending plans.

RECOMMENDATION: The Secretary of State for NI must provide guidance on proposed cuts on a departmental level, in light of consultation with the Irish Government, which should respond to full public consultation on these proposals. These should precede any significant changes to open-ended programmes being run by the Department of Education NI.

The Failure to Implement *A Fair Start* and Protect Children’s Rights **Professor Noel Purdy and Dr Karen Orr (Stranmillis University College)**

‘A Fair Start’: A Lost Opportunity
(Professor Noel Purdy)

Tackling educational underachievement requires significant investment and commitment. The *New Decade, New Approach* political settlement (Smith and Coveney, 2020) set out a requirement ‘to establish an expert group to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and draw up an action plan for change that will ensure all children and young people (CYP), regardless of background, are given the best start in life’.

Following 9 months of intensive consultation and research, *A Fair Start*, the final report and action plan of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland, was published on 1 June 2021, having been endorsed by all 5 Executive parties (Purdy et al., 2021). *A Fair Start* includes a total of 47 Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound (SMART) actions across 8 Key Areas, costed over the short term (1-2 years), medium term (3-4 years) and long term (5+ years). The level of projected annual funding builds up year on year as the various programme strands are developed and/or co-designed, reaching a total estimated annual expenditure of £73.1m by year 5. In the current economic climate, it is important to be able to justify such expenditure and so *A Fair Start* also includes explanatory notes to accompany each Key Area, setting out a rationale and providing referenced evidence from research.

A key message throughout *A Fair Start* is that the Northern Ireland (NI) government needs to see the delivery of these actions as an investment in the future rather than an expenditure for today. This foregrounds the major Early Years focus (Key Area 1) through which the vision is to create a seamless journey from pregnancy to pre-school, school and beyond, where every child is provided with the appropriate level of support needed in a timely and appropriate manner, in order to realise their potential. The other Key Areas focus on championing emotional health and wellbeing, ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of curriculum and assessment, promoting a whole community approach to education, maximising boys’ potential, driving forward professional development of teachers and school leaders, and ensuring interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.

Since its publication on 1 June 2021, a Programme Board has been established with responsibility for delivering on the actions in *A Fair Start* and three bi-annual progress reports have been published to date. The most recent progress report from the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI, 2022a) gave grounds for optimism, suggesting that 32 of the 47 actions were underway or had been achieved, 9 were imminent or likely to be achieved with some delay, and 7 had seen preliminary work undertaken to inform future delivery. It is also significant that the delivery of *A Fair Start* is cited in the Department of Education’s Annual Business Plan for 2022-23 (DENI, 2022b) and its Corporate Plan 2023-28 (DENI, 2022c).

Serious questions must now be raised however as to DENI’s ability to deliver on the implementation of the 47 actions in *A Fair Start*, given the current financial climate and significant spending cuts.

Children and Young People's Rights
(Dr Karen Orr)

Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stipulate that every child has the right to an education that develops every child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (UNCRC, 1989). Whilst these Articles attend to education specifically, it is important to highlight that rights are considered interdependent and indivisible, where failure to uphold one results in failure to uphold others. Additionally, education rights specifically are considered an important means to realising a range of other rights (Lundy et al., 2016), 'enhancing all rights and freedoms when it is guaranteed while jeopardising them all when it is violated' (Tomasevski, 2003, p. 7). For example, consider Article 6 which refers to the child's right to survival and development and Article 27 which stipulates that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. A child living in disadvantage coming to school potentially hungry, poorly nourished, stressed and tired will not be in a position to fully engage in education. Additionally, school life for some children is a sanctuary where they are afforded opportunities they may not get elsewhere, such as those articulated in Article 31 of the UNCRC where a child's right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts are protected. When considering a child's right to education it is therefore important to consider the child holistically and the circumstances and influences impacting upon the child's ability to fully enjoy their right to education. Whilst they may be in school, fulfilling statutory obligations, their capacity for full engagement, enjoyment and opportunities for success is limited. Their enjoyment of their rights, as articulated under the UNCRC, is threatened.

Having been briefed (by the Children's Law Centre on behalf of civil society) on the seriousness of the NI budget, the Committee on the Rights of the Child have recognised the threat to children's rights in NI. In their Concluding Observations, having reviewed the UK's and NI's most recent reporting regarding children's rights, the Committee have put forward the following timely recommendation for the State party:

'Withdraw the 2023/24 budget for Northern Ireland and fully consider the equality and human rights implications of a new budget, taking all possible steps to mitigate any adverse impact on children's rights before issuing a revised budget'. (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023).

With regard to public budgeting, O'Connell et al., (2014) put forward the importance of adopting a rights-based approach to public spending and decision making. Similarly, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment 19 on public budgeting for the realisation of children's rights highlights to States Parties their obligation to invest in children's rights (UNCRC, 2016). Informed by a global-scale research project (Lundy et al., 2020), this important document recommends that public budgeting should be open, accountable, and inclusive. It highlights the obligation to ensure that no children are discriminated against as a result of public spending. However, to the contrary, the cuts to education are disproportionately impacting those most vulnerable children in NI society. It is clear that the cuts that have been executed by DENI and other Departments will have a tangible and significant impact on children's rights to access education. It is imperative that the Secretary of State for NI recognises the gravity of the situation and acknowledges the recommendation from the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Finally, whilst the focus here is on the UNCRC, obligations under other international treaties must also be recognised, such as the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the European

Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to name a few. Indeed, a recent judgement (September 2020) from the ECHR found that Italy had violated an autistic student's (who was not afforded tailored assistance) rights to education and non-discrimination. Furthermore, the court's rejection of arguments based on financial restraints is an important consideration for budgetary decision making (*G.L. v Italy* (2020)).

RECOMMENDATION: In the absence of direct ministerial authorisation for decisions, the Department of Education NI should seek clarification from the Secretary of State for NI on how they should take account of the recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its decision-making processes.

Educational Underachievement

Dr Karen Orr (Stranmillis University College)

Poverty and Education

The evidence is clear: children living in disadvantage will not enjoy the same school experience, nor will they attain as well academically as their more affluent peers. There is strong evidence to suggest that a child's enjoyment of, or ability to participate fully in education and school life is impacted by their levels of disadvantage. Poverty raises a range of barriers and exclusions for children, a selection of which are presented below.

One barrier which has received much attention is the issue of children arriving at school hungry and the detrimental impact this can have on their school experience and outcomes. Research undertaken by YouGov, commissioned by Kellogg's, and involving 700 teachers from England and Wales highlighted the extent of hunger in English and Welsh classrooms and the devastating impact this can have in terms of learning loss. This report highlights that 2.4 pupils in every class (in England and Wales) attend school hungry at least once per week. The estimated (as per teacher perspectives) learning loss of arriving at school hungry is one hour per day, which equates to the loss of 8.4 weeks of learning time over the course of primary school life (Kellogg's, 2012). Considering more recent economic challenges, it is suggested that these figures will have worsened. More recent data from Northern Ireland (NI) specifically highlights that skipping breakfast is more prevalent amongst secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities, compared to those in more affluent areas (Simpson, 2022). In NI, the now diminished Extended Schools (ES) funding (which provides additional support to schools serving disadvantaged communities) provided much needed financial resource to schools to enable them to supply children with (amongst other activities) a free breakfast, ensuring they were starting their school day nourished and ready to learn. This is compounded by the loss of the Free School Meal Payment through the summer months, which will see over 96,300 NI children (who had been supported through this scheme) face potential 'holiday hunger' whilst out of school, the implications of which are further discussed below by Fitzpatrick (McClure and McNally, 2023).

Disadvantaged Children's Experience of School

The 'richness' of a child's school experience also appears to be determined by their level of disadvantage (Horgan, 2007). A report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) highlighted that poorer children recounted a different and less rich schooling experience, with fewer opportunities for music, art, and out of school activities, and greater accounts of shouting by teachers (Horgan, 2007). Similarly, Kennewell et al. (2022) highlighted the differences between disadvantaged and more affluent children's engagement in after-school activities. This research points to the positive association between engagement in after-school activities, such as sport, and improved wellbeing amongst children. However, this research also flags the role of socio-economic status in accessing such opportunities, where it showed that more affluent children engaged more frequently in sport, homework and reading, whereas more disadvantaged children more frequently engaged in screen-based activities. While it is welcome the Department of Education NI (DENI) is not proceeding with the 'full scale of proposed cuts to Extended Schools,' it remains a concern that the scheme will not be adequately resourced. Reduced ES funding may prevent disadvantaged children from availing of activities such as art, sports, music and drama, opportunities they are otherwise less likely to be able to access. *A Fair Start* (DENI, 2021) recommends investing significantly more in the Programme 'in order to incentivise schools to work more collaboratively with the communities they serve'. Furthermore, although Dr Browne's announcement provided assurances to the Youth Work sector in NI that funding would not be cut,

at the time of writing, a large number of community and voluntary sector youth centres across NI are trying to contend with reduced budgets and services. Youth Work Alliance claims that there are serious reductions in levels of provision, including reduced nights or removal of weekend opening, limited or no summer programming and reduction in capacity of up to 50% in terms of the numbers that can be facilitated (According to K. McCaugherty, personal communication, 21 June 2023). In-school coaching programmes run by the Irish Football Association (IFA) and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) have also been cut (Meredith, 2023a). Without further and sustained investment for extra-curricular youth programmes and opportunities to engage with fulfilling interests outside the classroom it is unlikely that educational disadvantage will be reduced.

Disadvantaged Children's Educational Outcomes and Attainment

As well as impacting upon their enjoyment of (and full participation in) education, living in poverty or coming from a disadvantaged background also impacts upon a child's educational outcomes and attainment (Farquarson, 2022; Goodman and Gregg, 2010; HM Government, 2014; Purdy et al., 2021). The negative relationship between disadvantage and academic attainment (the 'disadvantage attainment gap') has received much attention, evidenced and reported locally, nationally, and internationally (Demie, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; Purdy et al., 2021). The evidence suggests that the disadvantage gap begins at conception (determined largely by parental socio-economic status, health and wellbeing) and progresses to detrimentally impact upon physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (Oppenheim and Milton, 2021).

This gap is evidenced early on in a child's school life and widens throughout education. For example, data from the UK Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) highlights the gap in development between those from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to their more affluent peers, where specifically, a gap of 19.6 percentage points exists between the proportion of advantaged and disadvantaged children achieving a 'good level of development' at the age of five (Gov.UK, 2022). With regard to NI, data from the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrates a wider gap, where at age five approximately half of the gap in cognitive and language development was accounted for by structural and socio-economic factors, such as income, deprivation and parental education (Moore and Campbell, 2017). Similarly, the Education Endowment Foundation (2018) reports the disadvantage gap in terms of estimates in months, highlighting that there is a 4.3-month gap at the start of school (age five), which progresses to 9.5 months by the end of primary school and furthermore to 19.3 months by the end of secondary school (age 16). This disparity at the age of 16 years is also evident in NI, where despite overall rises in GCSE attainment rates, the attainment gap (measured by the proportion of young people obtaining at least five GCSEs A*-C or equivalent including English and maths) between pupils who are and are not entitled to a free school meal has remained largely unchanged since 2005/2006 (NIAO, 2021). In 2005/2006, the gap sat at 32 percentage points, reducing slightly to a 29 percentage point attainment gap in 2018/2019 (Demie, 2021; NIAO, 2021). This disparity has been particularly noticeable amongst Protestant boys who are entitled to a free school meal, for whom educational underachievement is a recognised concern (Purdy et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the disadvantage gap continues and is evidenced later in life in terms of employment and social mobility. Across Europe (OECD countries), findings demonstrate that, compared to those from more advantaged backgrounds, those adults who experienced socio-economic disadvantage in childhood are less likely to be employed. If employed, they earn approximately 20% less, and they also report worse health (OECD, 2022). Focusing on employment within NI specifically, linking data from 1991-2011, Moriarty et al. (2017) reported that those people whose

parents were unemployed in 1991 were more than twice as likely as other groups to be unemployed themselves in later life. Similarly, Purdy, Walsh, Harris and Mullan (in their chapter on NI in the Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation Report 2021*) reported that those from professional or more privileged backgrounds in NI are 80% more likely to be in jobs than those from working class backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). This evidence highlights the long-term impact of poverty and disadvantage on social mobility throughout the life course.

Across the evidence, the cyclical nature of poverty and disadvantage becomes clear, where disadvantage that begins at conception is evidenced in terms of educational disparities as early as age five, and continues to widen as a child progresses through their school life, and ultimately into adulthood in terms of employment and opportunities for social mobility. Such evidence points to the importance, value and need for early and sustained intervention and support. In order to address disparities evidenced in later years, it is vitally important that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are supported in order to enable them to fully engage in and enjoy school life and to provide them with equal opportunities to learn, develop and thrive.

Conclusions

In order to successfully narrow the education attainment gap, it is important that disadvantaged children receive support during the formative early years in education. At this stage, and as per the evidence, the gap has not yet fully widened, and so early intervention is critical. Furthermore, as children progress through education, sustained support is vital to ensure all children receive a positive school experience and are afforded equal opportunity for attainment and success.

RECOMMENDATION: A suite of funding for early intervention and further sustained support should be reviewed and, in light of that review, reinstated and supplemented to address educational disadvantage as a result of socio-economic factors. Short sighted cuts and 'savings' made during these formative years will ultimately result in further and greater public spending to address the resultant societal issues in the future.

Children and Young People who are in Poverty

Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick (Ulster University)

A Focus on Protected Characteristics

Despite the challenges posed by over ten years of austerity implemented by the Central Government (Westminster), there have been year-on-year improvements in educational outcomes at GCSE (or equivalent) and A-level (or equivalent). However, these gains are less obvious for children and young people (CYP) who fall into a section 75 group (the classification under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which recognises the need to protect against discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, race, sexual orientation, and the needs of looked after children) (NIAO, 2021). Children from the Traveller community, Roma children and children in care have some of the lowest levels of attainment of all equality groups (Burns et al., 2015). As outlined in *A Fair Start* a 'whole-school approach to nurture and schools having the scope (and budget) to provide a differentiated curriculum bespoke to their pupils' specific needs are essential in addressing these inequalities' (Purdy et al., 2021).

Food Insecurity for Children in Poverty

During school holidays, it is thought that the issue of child hunger is further exacerbated, whereby children are known to experience 'holiday hunger', as well as social isolation and boredom, which are thought to potentially intensify the differences in educational attainment (Shinwell et al., 2020). The cut to the 'Holiday Hunger Scheme' which provided £27 a fortnight to 96,300 children, as the price of food continues to rise at the fastest pace in 40 years is a matter of grave concern (ONS, 2023). A 'Free School Meals Payment' was introduced on 26 March 2020 by then Ministers Peter Weir (Education) and Deirdre Hargey (Communities) with cross-party support, which provided direct cash transfers to families with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) (DENI, 2020). This scheme has been extended consistently since then, as the COVID-19 pandemic has been followed by an economic crisis which has inflated the cost of everyday essentials, making it difficult for FSME families to afford food. Controversy raged in England during the COVID-19 pandemic as families reported poor food parcel alternatives to FSME (The Guardian, 2021). This led to England and Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford becoming involved in a national debate with the Government, which eventually led to the introduction of a National Voucher Scheme. In Scotland and Wales there was a patchwork of provision (cash transfer, vouchers, food parcels) dependent on Local Authorities resources (McIntyre et al, 2022). Meanwhile, NI arguably led the way by implementing a NI wide cash-first approach which provided families with the dignity of choice and control (Patrick et al, 2021).

Research by Spyreli et al. (2021) underlined that the FSME payment scheme in conjunction with the accessibility of food aid lessened families' expenditure and considerably contributed towards their food security during the pandemic. Removal of the Holiday Hunger Scheme will put increasing pressure on a charitable sector which is unsustainable (The Trussell Trust, 2023). The most recent figures from The Trussell Trust in NI (51 foodbanks) show that the organisation distributed 81,084 food parcels between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, including 35,335 for children. This is the most food parcels that the network in NI has ever distributed, representing a 29% increase in the food parcels in the same period in 2021/2022 (The Trussell Trust, 2023). It is also important to acknowledge that these figures do not account for food parcels delivered by the many independent food banks that fall outside the Trussell network and indeed food banks and pantries which are being set up by schools.

This is at a time when the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2023) reports a 18.4% increase in the price of food. The Resolution Foundation (Bell et al., 2023) predict that food inflation will fall relatively quickly later this year, but that the cost of food could continue to rise into the summer months, when parents in NI will have less support. The Resolution Foundation found that food made up 15% of total spending for the lowest income households in 2019-20, compared to 10% for the highest earning households, this was before inflation started to bite. A coping strategy for low-income households is to seek cheaper alternatives often from the discounted food shelves. However, if households are already buying own-brand alternatives and discount food there's a limited chance to find cheaper alternatives. As recent research on the experiences of Women in NI during the Cost-of-Living Crisis found, increasing prices coupled with lack of affordable foods has led to mothers skipping meals, resorting to cheaper processed foods and eating out-of-date food (Harding et al., 2023).

New research published by the Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study (based at London School of Economics), which is following 13,000 young people, provides compelling evidence of the impact of food insecurity on educational attainment. Pupils in families who reported using foodbanks during the pandemic received lower GCSE grades (almost half a grade per subject), even taking into account past grades and other features of their household finances, with long-term disadvantage being a more significant factor than the pandemic. The same study also shows that rates of psychological distress were substantially higher in households who started using foodbanks during the pandemic (53% among young people and 63% among parents) (Cullinane et al., 2023). This vividly demonstrates the long-term impact of food insecurity on both educational attainment and on mental health, which supports Spyreli et al's (2021) conclusion that further food related support is needed to mitigate the increased risks of food insecurity for economically disadvantaged children.

It is clear that poverty and educational underachievement are inextricably linked (Early et al., 2022). The report of the Expert Advisory Panel, who were appointed to provide recommendations for an NI Executive led Anti-Poverty Strategy emphasised that poverty is a 'cross-cutting' issue and that all departments should engage with programmes that are targeted on the basis of area-based deprivation. It is crucial that the Holiday Hunger Scheme is reinstated as increasing food insecurity will lead to better educational outcomes.

The Education Gap following the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Engage Programme was a targeted intervention developed by the DENI to 'limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school/setting through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team-teaching support in every school/setting in Northern Ireland' (DENI, 2023a). The approach went some way to implementing 'tailored approaches to teaching and learning' outlined in 'A Fair Start' (DENI, 2021). The Engage Programme was due to continue into a third year at the same level of provision before it was cut at the end of March 2023. Horgan et al. (2020) report that over 970 primary and post-primary schools' benefits from Engage funding, with approximately 443 primary and post-primary schools with above average levels of FSM entitlement (27% of pupils) being provided with a higher level of funding to support additional teachers and substitute teachers during the 2022/23 year to support pupils to engage with learning. DENI outline that the impact of COVID-19 was felt disproportionately across s.75 groups, thus the end of the Engage Programme 'will have a negative impact on all school aged children who would have been targeted with Engage support, alongside their families' (DENI, 2023a). This will be further explored below, with respect to the disproportional impact on minority ethnic CYP.

School Uniform Costs

Financial hardship will be further compounded by the pressure of school uniform costs. The current school uniform grant in NI is significantly less than those in other parts of the UK (e.g., it is £42.90 per primary school child age pupil compared to £120 in Scotland). This is despite the Minister for Education announcing a 20% rise in the school uniform grant last summer (DENI, 2022). There are no uniform grants available for nursery age children. The 'Parent Engagement Group' (PEG, 2021) which campaigns for school uniform reform in NI has voiced concern about the cost of branded items and the lack of choice in respect of suppliers. The group also reported that the average cost of a primary school uniform in NI was £173 and post primary £378 (PEG, 2021). Such costs are undoubtedly challenging for children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in households with multiple school aged children. The failure of government to review the school uniform grant coupled with the Cost-of-Living Crisis has led to schools and community organisations setting up 'uniform swaps shops' to support local families, which relies on parents and/or teachers and local volunteers to organise, sort and distribute. An increased reliance on charitable provision can increase the stigma that parents and children feel, exacerbating feelings of social exclusion. Furthermore, research from The Children's Society (2020) estimates that half a million children in the UK have been sent home from school due to having incorrect uniform.

Period Products

DENI also confirmed that it would cut its funding to support Free Period Products by 40% (from £413,786 to £243,000) for 2023/24 undermining the intention of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. Again, in research by Harding et al. (2023), sanitary products were found to be a source of financial strain for households, particularly where there were young people who needed access to them. Indeed, in moving the Bill, Pat Catney MLA then quoted Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) period poverty survey statistics which showed 53% of pupils who menstruate felt embarrassed buying period products, while 56% had to ask to borrow from a friend or teacher. Less funding means that less support will be available and represents a retrograde step in the movement towards providing free universal access to tampons, pads and reusable options (Period Products (Free Provision Bill) 2021).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the evidence presented strongly denotes the consequences that the current cuts to education will have on our most disadvantaged children. The schemes which have been removed sought to reduce inequalities and educational underachievement for our young citizens. If we do not urgently invest in education, we risk putting up further socio-economic barriers which will increase educational underachievement. The existing barriers have been heightened by simultaneous public crises and are becoming insurmountable for our CYP to climb.

RECOMMENDATION: The Holiday Hunger Scheme, Free Period Products Scheme and support for school uniform costs are vital interventions recognising genuine needs in order to mitigate socio-economic barriers to participation in education. These schemes should be immediately reinstated or have full funding restored.

Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing

Dr John McMullen (Queen’s University Belfast)

Cause for Concern

Cuts to school budgets and to organisations that provide support within the education sector, have the potential to negatively impact the wellbeing of children and young people (CYP). In their introduction to the recent ‘Children and Young People’s Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework’ (DENI and DoH, 2021a), the Education and Health Ministers (at the time) noted ‘increasing concern around the wellbeing of our children and young people’ and stated their recognition of ‘our collective responsibility in supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of our children and young people and those working with them’.

There was reason for concern. A survey of the mental health of children and parents (Bunting et al., 2020) highlighted that CYP in NI are 25% more likely to experience common mental health problems compared to those in England, Scotland or Wales. Northern Ireland (NI) has disproportionately higher rates of death by suicide of young people. The same survey found that one in ten 11–19-year-olds in NI reported self-injurious behaviour and close to one in eight reported thinking about or attempting suicide. The legacy of the NI conflict, and the resulting high levels of economic deprivation, are thought to be contributory factors to the high levels of mental ill health in NI (O’Neill et al., 2015).

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People’s (NICCY) ‘Still Waiting’ review of mental health support for CYP in NI (NICCY, 2018), found that the investment in emotional and mental health services for CYP at the time was inadequate and that substantial additional and sustainable funding was required, to ensure their needs were being met at the earliest opportunity, and in the most effective way. We are still waiting, and the need has increased (NICCY, 2022).

There was evidence of a detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on CYP’s mental health in the UK (Creswell et al., 2021). While most CYP have now bounced back, lockdown exacerbated pre-existing mental ill health among individuals, families and communities, and also greatly challenged the systems in place to care for them. CYP from lower income households, those with a parent/carer experiencing psychological distress, and those with special educational needs (SEN), in particular showed elevated symptoms (Ding et al., 2023; Raw et al., 2021). The Co-SPACE study tracked CYP and parent mental health during the pandemic, with follow-up data published in 2022-23. One of their final recommendations was to accelerate the provision of evidence-based support and accessible interventions to those who required these, in order to help young people to bounce back from the impact of the pandemic and protect them from future adversities. (Pearcey et al., 2023). In NI currently the cuts referred to throughout this report appear to decelerate this provision.

The end of Happy Healthy Minds

Cancellation of the ‘Healthy Happy Minds’ primary schools counselling programme is a palpable example of cuts to mental health support. This progressive programme was one of a range of measures developed to support the implementation of the DENI and DoH (2021a) Framework. It provided support to primary school age pupils with the aim of enhancing wellbeing and reducing the risk of CYP developing mental illness. ‘Healthy Happy Minds’ was a pilot programme funded via Covid monies, and was due to finish in March 2022. The pilot was subject to two extensions

via Ministerial Direction, but ended in March 2023. The DENI's (2023b) discontinuation report highlights that evaluation of the programme is ongoing, but that continuation of the programme is unaffordable.

Supporting the Supporters

We would argue that this is the tip of the iceberg, and that continued cuts to school budgets and to the other services/supports discussed in this paper, have potential to have a deeper impact on the mental health and wellbeing of our CYP, due to the cumulative impact throughout their various interacting systems. One example of potential systemic impact is on the capacity and wellbeing of school staff. Hughes and Baylin (2012) wrote about 'blocked care', whereby parents who are eager to make a connection with their child are unable to provide positive attachment and attunement, due to their own unmanageable levels of stress and anxiety. As Educational Psychologists, we see this in schools also, for example when teachers' own stress reduces their capacity to sustain positive relationships with pupils.

School staff already experience higher levels of work-related stress than employees in other occupations, which places them at increased risk of developing common mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression (Kidger, et al., 2016; Stansfeld et al., 2011). One of our trainee Educational Psychologists has recently completed doctoral research on the school environmental factors impacting upon stress and burnout in primary school teachers in NI (McAllister, 2023). The results demonstrated that 64.5% of respondents (n = 172) felt either 'overextended', 'ineffective', 'disengaged' or 'burnt-out'. The results implied that, even before the current funding cuts, the teaching profession in NI was heading towards crisis. Teachers felt that schools were not adequately resourced given the extent of their needs, stating they felt isolated and unsupported.

We know that teacher wellbeing can have a direct impact on pupil wellbeing (Roffey, 2012), academic attainment (Arens and Morin, 2016; Briner and Dewberry, 2007) and motivation (Tikkanen et al., 2021). Better teacher-pupil relationships lead to more effective classroom management (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009), and provide more protective factors for vulnerable and challenging pupils (Roffey, 2016). Supporting staff wellbeing can cascade positive effects through classrooms and schools. However, as stated in the DENI and DoH (2021a) Framework, 'if staff are not effectively supported, they cannot be expected to properly support the children and young people in their care'.

A Whole School Approach

The DENI and DoH (2021a) Framework also asserts that a mentally healthy school is one that adopts a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing, with provision of effective early support to CYP who are at risk of poor outcomes. Emotional wellbeing is fundamental and foundational for academic attainment. A stressed, anxious child will have difficulty learning. Conversely, pupils with better mental health and wellbeing are likely to achieve better academically, be more motivated, and feel more committed and connected with learning and with school (Public Health England, 2014).

A good school provides a structured and secure environment, predictable routines, consistency, relationships, community, belonging and connection. Most CYP will not require counselling or other forms of individual intervention. However, for those that do, schools can help to reduce stigma and reach out to individuals who may face barriers in accessing mental health support beyond the school. Fazel et al. (2014) suggests that embedding mental health support within the

school environment can provide a therapeutic, non-stigmatising space, and create a continuum of integrative care that improves both mental health and educational attainment.

There is a substantive body of research demonstrating a positive impact of evidence-based, school-based interventions on social, emotional and educational outcomes, regardless of students' race, or socioeconomic background (Clarke et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Weare and Nind, 2011). Whole-school approaches to social and emotional learning, universally implemented for all pupils, also strongly correlate with higher attainment (Banerjee et al., 2013). School-based interventions have also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing psychological distress and promoting wellbeing among CYP from various cultural backgrounds including those who have experienced trauma (McMullen et al., 2021; McMullen and Eaton, 2021; McMullen et al., 2020; McMullen and McMullen, 2018; McMullen and O'Callaghan, 2013).

School-based Intervention

It is important to highlight that not all school-based mental health interventions are beneficial for all pupils. A recent article by Foulkes and Stringaris (2023) argues that some may be ineffective or even harmful. They assert that we should be cautious about the idea that providing any mental health intervention in a school is always better than not providing one at all. This highlights the importance of rigorous evaluation, and further research to explore the mechanisms through which beneficial (and adverse) outcomes may occur in school settings.

Large-scale economic analyses have shown that (on top of gains in health and quality of life), evidence-based, school-based interventions can generate significant economic benefits including savings in public expenditure (Belfield et al., 2015; Knapp et al., 2011; McDaid and Park, 2011). Many of the interventions reviewed in these papers are low-cost and offer 'outstandingly good value for money' (Knapp et al., 2011). The payoffs are due to better educational performance, improved employment/earnings and reduced crime.

In England, the Green Paper for transforming children and young people's mental health (DHSC and DfE, 2017) detailed proposals for expanding access to mental health care for CYP. Core commitments included establishing Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) in education settings to deliver evidence-based interventions for mild-to-moderate mental health issues, and the training of Senior Mental Health Leads in all schools and colleges. The government pledged £500 million for mental health support for CYP in England during the 2020 Spending Review. 35% of pupils and students in England (almost 3 million) were expected to have access to a MHST by 2023.

In NI, there have been advances stemming from the Implementation Plan for the DENI and DoH Framework (2021b). For example, a School Staff Wellbeing Project, led by Educational Psychologists within the Education Authority (EA) and funded by DENI, has provided evidence-based training through a series of webinars followed by wellbeing-focused cluster groups alongside other schools. Evaluation of the training indicates that participants increased their knowledge and confidence in supporting staff wellbeing and developing a staff wellbeing policy. To date 188 schools have attended the training and over 100 schools have expressed an interest to attend. However, future rollout of the training may be in question due to uncertainty regarding funding.

Another target in the Implementation Plan was the introduction of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Emotional Wellbeing Teams in School (EWTS). The EWTS were proposed to act in a consultative capacity, promoting emotional wellbeing, building resilience and

intervening at the earliest opportunity. There has been a delay in this Health-led project, but communications with DENI suggests that this is due to move forward soon. DENI officials also highlighted that there is sufficient budget to continue the other projects contained in the DENI and DoH Framework Implementation Plan (2021b).

When discussing school-based support, it is important to note that an increasing number of pupils are experiencing difficulty attending school (Meredith, 2023b). Many of these experience emotionally-based school avoidance, and a significant number are not receiving any support due to strain on services (Meredith, 2023c). As outlined in the DENI and DoH Wellbeing Framework (2021a), the CAMHS Stepped Care Model, and the Children and Young People's Strategy (2020-2030), have collective responsibility for CYP wellbeing, and an integrated approach across the Education, Health, Community and Voluntary, and Justice sectors is essential.

Conclusions

In the absence of intervention, childhood mental health difficulties have a strong tendency to persist throughout childhood and adolescence into adult life (Knapp et al., 2011). In 2023 in NI we should be increasing early preventative support for our CYP's social and emotional wellbeing, not cutting it. As outlined above, this should be seen as future investment rather than an expense. Support should include direct intervention where required, but also support for the teams around our CYP. Resilience resides in these relationships.

RECOMMENDATION: We recommend that evaluation of the Happy Healthy Minds programme is expedited to ensure that the interventions delivered have an evidence-base of positive outcomes, and to preclude ineffective programmes and those with potentially negative outcomes. Funding should be prioritised for early intervention and prevention programmes, and also those that involve capacity building and wellbeing support for school staff. This should include the introduction of Emotional Wellbeing Teams in School (EWTS), and further rollout of the EA's School Staff Wellbeing Project.

Early Intervention and Development

Professor Victoria Simms (Ulster University)

Infant Learning

Current evidence suggests that children's early experiences (generally within the first 5 years of life) can influence multiple future outcomes, including attainment, health, and economic productivity (Hoff, 2003; World Bank, 2015). In a review of health inequalities, Marmot et al. (2010) established: 'what happens in these early years, starting in the womb, has lifelong effects'. Therefore, investment in the early years is seen as being vitally important to support the health, development and learning of children and young people (CYP) (Marmot, 2010). Although negative experiences in this period are not intractable, it is vitally important to support families during this critical period of child development (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

Attainment differences between children can be observed at school entry (Duncan et al., 2007) and investment in interventions for early childhood development can have far-reaching impacts. The Heckman Equation describes the disproportionate economic benefits of early intervention, with diminishing returns with increasing age of children receiving support (Heckman, 2012). This evidence suggests that early intervention not only works but is also economically beneficial for society as a whole.

Parents are children's first educators, and early learning begins informally in the home when parents interact with their children (LeFevre et al., 2009; Niklas and Schneider, 2014). Thus, the quality of the home learning environment has been identified as being important for children's future attainment (Melhuish et al., 2008), for example, engaging with early literacy activities is related to children's later reading and language skills (Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2014). The quality of the home learning environment can be measured by assessing access to resources for learning, such as books and toys that can be used to engage children in literacy and numeracy activities (Anders et al., 2012; Cankaya and LeFevre, 2016; Melhuish et al., 2008). In addition, parents may be asked to report the frequency with which they have engaged with certain types of activities (Bracken and Fischel, 2008) or their attitudes and expectations towards literacy and/or numeracy (Dong et al., 2020).

Shared Reading

A commonly occurring home literacy activity is shared book reading (Grolig, 2020). This research emphasises that access to resources must be combined with support for parent-child interaction around these resources, as these seem to be the driver of development of comprehension and vocabulary – important foundation skills for reading (Grolig, 2020). Using data from Growing Up in Ireland cohort study, Leech et al. (2022) established that parent reports of shared book reading when their infant was 9 months old, predicted children's vocabulary skills when they were 3 years old. In addition, children who were exposed to shared book reading at 9 months old also lived in homes where they were read to more frequently and had more books at 3 years old. Importantly, this engagement predicted outcomes over and above socio-economic status of families, emphasising the importance of universal access to reading materials and parents' prioritisation of reading activities with their children.

Roberts et al. (2005) tracked low-income African American children and their parents from infancy to early childhood and identified that the amount of exposure to shared book reading did not predict attainment. Instead, maternal approaches and strategies to shared book reading and

sensitive parenting during these activities predicted children's receptive vocabulary at 4 years old. Therefore, an important component of universal Book Gifting Schemes is not just providing access to resources, but in tandem providing parents with either information or training on shared book-reading strategies. These types of interventions aim to develop a culture of literacy within the home. Even relatively light-touch provision of parent training (e.g. one hour of face-to-face training or the provision of home learning activity reminder text messages has been seen to increase children's reading and numeracy attainment (Cahoon et al., preprint). There are many examples of Book Gifting Schemes, including Reach Out and Read (USA), Book Trust (UK) and Dolly Parton's Imagination library (Worldwide). Overall, evidence suggests that these schemes improve parents' attitudes towards reading, increase children's enjoyment in reading, improve children's linguistic abilities, increase families' use of libraries and improve children's attainment (Egan et al., 2020). For a relatively low-cost intervention Book Gifting Schemes are regarded as effective family-focused tools to improve children's outcomes.

Conclusions

The removal of funding for the Book Start Baby scheme run by Book Trust in NI was announced in April 2023. This universal scheme reached 20,000 families with infants in NI and provided two free books to all infants. In addition, advice on reading to infants and young children was provided through a trusted source, the community health visitors. This collaboration between education and health exemplifies the need for "holistic" approaches for successful early childhood interventions. Currently, similar universal Book Gifting Schemes run in England, Wales and Scotland. Infants in NI will subsequently be the only children in the UK who do not receive this evidence-based support.

RECOMMENDATION: The Book Start Baby scheme should be reinstated to ensure that access to learning resources and parent support is equitable across the constituent parts of the UK.

Early Years Education

Suzanne McCarney and Barbara McConnell (Stranmillis University College)

The Significance of Early Years Interventions

At the start of June 2023, there was a welcome acknowledgement for the reversal of the decision to cut the funding for Early Years programmes including the Pathway Fund, Sure Start, Bright Start and Toybox (Browne, 2023). This decision by the Department of Education NI (DENI) was very much welcomed and highlights the importance placed on Early intervention and early support and the need to continue to prioritise services and programmes. The significance of this decision acknowledges the developmental significance of the age group and the importance of 'getting it right' for children from an early age. This sentiment is supported by a wealth of evidence and has been increasingly prominent in public policy over the past three decades. For example, the literature review carried out to inform the development of 'Birth to Three Matters' at the turn of the century (David et al., 2003) acknowledges the established and somewhat common-sense acceptance of the significance of a child's earliest years.

As infancy and toddlerhood is the stage at which the nervous system is immature, and therefore most malleable or 'plastic', experiences in early childhood will impact how an individual adapts and develops throughout their life, with negative experiences during this stage likely to cast an 'especially long shadow' on future outcomes (David et al., 2003). In acknowledgement of the extensive evidence outlining the benefits of early learning and development, *A Fair Start* (Purdy et al., 2021) emphasised the need to redirect focus to Early Years to provide more equitable outcomes for children, families and communities. Recommendations include introducing a child care strategy; improving workforce capacity, skills and qualifications, integrating speech and language therapy into the antenatal space and ensuring the 0-3 pre-school education is shaped to the age and stage of the children attending.

A Fair Start builds on work by proponents of Early Years Education such as Allen (2011), who argues that early intervention offers meaningful opportunities to make significant and lasting improvements in the lives of children and, by doing so, can prevent many persistent social problems that are often transmitted across generations. Allen argues that this approach is best implemented in the first three years of life, yet provision of effective evidence-based early intervention services remains 'persistently patchy' and undermined by institutional and financial difficulties. As a result, a persisting bias towards existing policies of 'late intervention' remains – even though these policies are known to be expensive and largely ineffective.

Early Years Policy in Northern Ireland

The Children's Strategy for Northern Ireland (OFMDFM, 2006) notes a commitment to a gradual shift towards early intervention, without removing services from children and young people (CYP) currently in crisis. Whilst no one would advocate for the removing of services from those experiencing crisis, statements such as this create a false dichotomy, pitting existing crisis services against much needed early intervention services, thereby abdicating a degree of responsibility and exacerbating the situation presented by Allen (2011) in which 'late intervention' and existing services are funded instead of, rather than as well as, new and early intervention services. This may in part be explained by the costly nature of late intervention services, estimated by Fitzsimons and Teager (2018) to be £536 million per year in NI (i.e. £288 for every resident, or £1,166 per child) and by the still under-researched nature of universal, age-based early intervention services (Winter et al., 2018).

This can be seen in the cross-departmental Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) (Strawbridge, 2017). The programme aims to improve outcomes for children and young people across NI through the embedding of early intervention approaches into existing services. The programme was built on four workstreams, the first three correspond with the Hardiker model (1991) to target different levels of need:

- o Workstream One (WS1) aims to equip all parents with the skills needed to give their child the best start in life.
- o Workstream Two (WS2) aims to support families when problems arise before they need statutory involvement.
- o Workstream Three (WS3) aims to positively address the impact of adversity on children and their families.
- o Workstream Four (WS4) is an overarching initiative, targeting professional development with a particular focus on Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Given the components of workstream three relate to juvenile justice, NEET young people (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and the foster care system, it is difficult to ascertain which definition of early intervention is being accepted as these services can neither be understood to be focused on the first three years of life (as in Allen's, 2011 perception of early intervention) nor early in the progression of adversity (as in Dawson's et al., 2010 perception of early intervention). Rather, these services largely target children and young people in crisis, rendering the term early intervention to mean little more than 'could have been later intervention'. Further problems with rebranding existing services as early intervention without adequate change to said services can be seen in workstream one. Workstream one relates most closely to early education and childcare, addressing services for children under five, and is made up of three components:

- o 'Getting ready for baby' targets antenatal services for first time parents, offering group-based parent support classes.
- o 'Getting Ready for Toddler' introduces the 3+ Health Review – a collaboration between health visiting and Early Years practitioners, in pre-schools. Using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social and Emotional (ASQ:SE), the review aims to identify children who may need support to meet developmental milestones. EITP was designed to enhance and upskill existing services.
- o 'Getting Ready to Learn' seeks to support pre-school education providers to encourage and develop parental involvement in children's early learning through a number of grant-based programmes.

The second component, 'Getting Ready for Toddler' is problematic as not only are parents not 'getting ready' for a toddler, they no longer have a toddler when their child is in pre-school. EITP was designed to be embedded into existing services. Therefore, the fact that no universal services exist for toddlers in NI meant toddlers, and their parents, were catered for in name only in this programme. This reflects the wider policy and service provision context for toddlers in NI as McGuinness et al. (2012) report a significant gap in policy and service provision, suggesting a focus on this age group is only beginning to emerge and is still lacking.

Whilst NI is particularly behind on some aspects of provision for two-year-old children, such as being the only region in the UK to not have policy guidance specifically for practice with children under three (England, Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, 2018; Scotland, pre-birth to three, Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010; Wales, CYMRU, 2014), in other respects it is certainly not unique or alone in paying limited amounts of attention to this age group. The systematic review (Fillis et al., 2018) found a lack of empirical evidence relating to effective services and interventions for young children aged 24 to 36 months. The relatively small number of eligible studies generated, the lack of geographical diversity in the included studies and findings indicating limited impact from a number of the included studies, all suggest there is a discrepancy between the proclaimed significance of the first three years of life and the reality of the research, policy and service provision landscape for this age group.

This is supported in the available data on access to early education and childcare services in NI. For example, Early Years (2011) reports a demand of ten applications for every place on one of Sure Start's key services. Similarly, Early Years' 'Contribution of the Voluntary, Community and Independent Sector report' (2011) highlighted a waiting list of over 3000 infants and toddlers aged one-three years for childcare services. The draft Childcare Strategy (OFMDFM, 2015) acknowledges this is likely to be more problematic in some areas as there may be discrepancies between where places are available and where they are required. For example, there tends to be less childcare provision in rural areas (29% of parents reporting unmet childcare needs), disadvantaged areas (due to difficulties in financial sustainability) and in the western region (Counties Antrim and Down account for 67% of registered providers) of NI. In NI, there is significantly less centre-based childcare than elsewhere in the UK (Butler and Rutter, 2016). In 2014, there were 340 registered Day Nursery, offering 14,690 places to children under twelves, although primarily children under five. Research carried out by the Equality Commission (McQuaid et al., 2013) found this to be insufficient for a number of families, particularly those with children under two years, those with a child who is disabled, those living in rural areas and those with more than one child requiring full-time childcare. Further, research carried out for the Children's Strategy (OFMDFM, 2015) found more than half of parents viewed cost, rather than availability, as the main barrier to accessing childcare services.

Many parents reported struggling to meet the costs of childcare and stated that cost prevents them either from using registered childcare services at all, or from using these services as much or as often as they would prefer. Failure to prioritise childcare for more than a decade has contributed to the crisis in affordability and availability of suitable childcare. Recent figures from Employers for Childcare, found that the average cost of a full-time childcare place was £170 per week and equates to 34% of the median household income (Employers for Childcare, 2021). Ongoing pressures following the COVID-19 pandemic and Cost-of-Living Crisis are likely to further exacerbate the costs and availability of childcare. Urgent intervention is needed to remove the barriers that exist for families access to childcare that can support the journey into education.

Early Year Practitioners

In addition to the need to prioritise and support early intervention and early years services, there is a need to fund the deficiency in practitioner training. Existing literature demonstrates an under-professionalised workforce where the qualifications and working conditions of the practitioners do not reflect the reported significance of the age group they are working with. This is the case in NI and is consistent with wider qualification trends in the sector. Smedley and Hoskins (2019) acknowledge the UK's Early Years workforce has historically been characterised by low pay, poor working conditions and vocational, rather than graduate, qualifications. Research carried out for the Childcare Strategy (OFMDFM, 2014) found 35% (n=337) of survey respondents had no

childcare qualifications; almost all of whom (n=335) were childminders. Overall, 10% (n=97) of survey respondents had either a foundation degree, degree or a postgraduate qualification. However, a higher percentage, 30% (N=17), of day nursery staff held a foundation degree, degree or postgraduate qualification, slightly higher than the percentage qualified to degree level in this study (23%, N=11). This is problematic as staff qualifications, particularly the presence of a graduate, is frequently referred to as a core indicator of quality in early education and childcare settings. A national Graduate Leader Fund operating in England from 2007 to 2011 found settings that gained a graduate made significant advances in quality through the contribution of the graduate and the added value of their influence on setting-wide practice and planning procedures (Mathers et al., 2011). Following the end of the Graduate Leader Fund the Department for Education (DfE) encouraged local authorities to continue to provide incentives to develop graduate early education and childcare provision and as a result, the number of graduates in settings has continued to increase. However, a similar initiative has not been implemented in NI and the data relating to the number of settings with a graduate is not available.

One barrier to increasing the qualification requirements for practitioners is cost. The cost of employing graduates is substantial with graduate staff being paid around a third more than staff with a level three qualification. This is evident when comparing private and voluntary day care settings where non-supervisory staff earn an average of £6.80 per hour and senior managers earn £11.20 per hour (average) and statutory pre-school settings where staff earn an average of £9 per hour and over £20 per hour respectively (Butler and Rutter, 2016). The impact of this is evident from the Effective Pre-school Provision in NI (EPPNI) study, which found statutory pre-school provision had the overall best outcomes for children (Melhuish et al., 2006). Other types of pre-school, including voluntary playgroups and private day cares, produced benefits but to a lesser extent. This continues to be the case, as the Chief Inspectorate's report for the Education Training Inspectorate (2014-2016) found only 13% of voluntary/private preschools achieved outstanding with regards to leadership and management, compared to 26% in nursery units and 67% in nursery schools. This disparity in pay and quality is also reflected in the required qualifications for early education and childcare practitioners in the statutory and private and voluntary sectors. Pre-school teachers in the statutory sector possess a degree level qualification with qualified teacher status whereas for those working in the voluntary and private sectors, i.e. all services for two-year-old children, the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12, Standard 11 apply (DHSSPS, 2012, Standard 11), meaning only half of the staff are required to possess a relevant level two childcare qualification.

Whilst some settings may exceed these requirements, the associated salaries are based on the minimum standards (DHSSPS, 2012) and so the incentive to exceed the basic requirements is minimal. Walsh (2016) suggests this can translate to a poor skillset with regards to competence in literacy and numeracy, as for these qualifications a GCSE in English and Mathematics is not required. This leaves the potential for children to be in a setting where none of the practitioners, other than the leader/manager, has a GCSE in mathematics or English (as no qualifications are required for 50% of the staff, and mathematics and English GCSEs are not a prerequisite for the remaining 50%) and may therefore have unintended negative implications for children's outcomes. As for leaders and emerging leaders of Early Years settings in the voluntary/private sector, a Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) level 5 diploma in leadership (or children's care, learning and development (CCLD) or play work at level 5) has now been established as the minimum attainment level (DHSSPS, 2012) rather than the graduate status deemed to be necessary in local and international research (McMillan and McConnell, 2015). In this way, the Minimum Standards (DHSSPS, 2012) mark progress in the professionalisation of early education and childcare but fall short of advocating for a graduate-led workforce, the need for which has been clearly articulated in international research (Walsh, 2016). Therefore, whilst recognition

ought to be given to the hard work and goodwill of staff across the sector, Walsh (2016) argues the primary question remains whether the Government in NI is willing to adequately invest in quality early education and childcare, and therefore, in the development of the workforce.

Conclusions

Due to the rapidly developing brain of infants and toddlers (Perry, 2014) earlier intervention is better. If the goal is to efficiently and effectively provide the opportunity for all children, particularly those who have experienced disadvantage, to achieve positive outcomes, intervention in the first three years of life is necessary. Within this framework, the argument for maintaining a targeted approach to service provision is strengthened, ensuring ultimately finite resources are reserved for those who need them most. However, this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the significant increase of infants and toddlers under three years who are being enrolled in private, voluntary and independent day nurseries (Finnegan, 2016, cited by Boardman, 2019), largely due to increases in maternal employment. This increase in extra-familial care makes the expansion of services for children under three a necessity and inevitability; moving the central question from being concerned with the quantity of services for this age group to the quality of those services.

RECOMMENDATION:

Continue to prioritise and invest in Early interventions where the evidence shows you get the biggest impact. This should be supported through investment in the Graduate workforce to support children and families who are most vulnerable in the early years. Investment in Sure Start should be increased and made sustainable to widen the reach to meet those who are educationally disadvantaged.

Minority Ethnic Children and Young People

Dr Rebecca Loader (Queen’s University Belfast)

Intersectional Educational Impacts

Following significant demographic change over the past two decades, minority ethnic pupils comprise 6.1% of the pupil population in NI (DENI, 2023a)¹. While their experiences are highly diverse, there is evidence of particular need among some minority ethnic groups, among refugees and asylum-seekers, and among children classified as ‘newcomers’ - that is, those who do ‘not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum’ (DENI, 2009a, p.iii).

Research on poverty and ethnicity in NI is not extensive but indicates that minority ethnic and migrant residents experience higher rates of poverty than the wider population (Edmiston et al., 2022; Lucas and Jarman, 2016). At school level, clear disparities emerge between ethnic groups in Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME): while rates are below the average of 28% among Indian, Chinese and Bangladeshi pupils, FSME is above average among pupils of mixed background (31%), pupils from the ‘other’ ethnic group (35%), Black pupils (37%) and those from an Irish Traveller background (65%) (Loader et al., 2023). Higher rates of economic disadvantage make children from these groups particularly vulnerable to the effects of cuts in education, including the withdrawal of ‘Holiday Hunger’ payments for children entitled to Free School Meals (Meredith, 2023a). There is therefore a need to consider the intersectional influences of ethnicity and poverty in assessing the impact of funding reductions.

The Importance of Extended Schools

Extended Schools (ES) funding is targeted to schools in areas of high disadvantage to support the provision of services and activities that ‘meet the learning and development needs of pupils, their families and local communities’ (DENI, 2022a). Given the concentration of certain minority ethnic populations (for example, recent migrants and Irish Travellers) in areas of disadvantage, decreased funding for ES – albeit at a lower level than initially announced – remains likely to have a substantial impact on this population. Of the 40 primary schools with the highest percentage of newcomers in NI (>25%) in 2022/23, for example, 29 were in receipt of ES funding (DENI, 2022b, 2023b).

Analysis of ES expenditure in 2021/22 (Education Authority, 2023) indicates funding being used in ways that meet the needs of migrant and minority ethnic pupils and families as identified in recent research (e.g. Kernaghan, 2015; Loader et al, 2023; McMullen et al., 2020). This includes support with homework, English language and literacy, and parental involvement at school. In the first case, 112 homework clubs were provided through ES funding in 2021/22. Research has identified these as an important resource for children whose parents do not have English as a first language or have low levels of literacy and may struggle to help with homework directly (Loader

¹ This number reflects those recorded in the school census as belonging to an ethnic group other than the white ethnic group. Currently, data on ethnicity in NI - unlike educational data elsewhere in the UK - does not disaggregate pupils from white migrant backgrounds from those with white NI/British/Irish backgrounds. Thus, these pupils are not recorded in ethnic minority statistics in NI, though the use of the term ‘minority ethnic group(s)’ in this report encompasses these children. Newcomer data, by comparison, is inclusive of all children who do not have the language skills in English or Irish to access the curriculum.

et al, 2023; McMullen et al, 2020). Reduction in the provision of homework support through ES is thus likely to have a distinct impact on this group.

In 2021/22, 266 literacy programmes and 78 language clubs, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) clubs, were funded through the ES initiative. These have been identified in NI as areas of particular need for Traveller and newcomer pupils to reduce achievement gaps and, among newcomers specifically, to increase curriculum access and social integration (Bloomer et al., 2014; Kernaghan, 2015; Loader et al., 2023; McMullen et al., 2020, 2021; Taskforce on Traveller Education, 2011). Research on newcomer education indicates that, while schools receive designated funding for newcomer pupils, this may not extend to funding the after-school activities that some teachers have identified as important to consolidate English language learning and literacy (Kernaghan, 2015). With newcomer funding likely to be under pressure as schools seek to balance reduced budgets, cuts to ES funding risk compounding other reductions in school-based support for English language and literacy.

ES funding includes a 15% uplift to support parental engagement for schools working in clusters, with 205 parenting programmes delivered in 2021/22. Research has consistently identified the importance of parents' involvement for children's learning and learning outcomes (Axford et al., 2019; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), but also reveals challenges to involvement among minority ethnic parents, including their own negative experience of schooling, language barriers, different cultural expectations of home-school relationships, and feelings of anxiety (Kernaghan, 2015; Knipe et al., 2005; Loader et al., 2023; McMullen et al., 2020). Reports have recommended enhancing school engagement with minority ethnic parents and highlighted examples of good practice for dissemination, such as befriending schemes, parenting classes and English language classes for parents (Kernaghan, 2015; Robertson, 2020; Taskforce on Traveller Education, 2011). However, cuts to ES threaten provision for parental engagement among these groups and may impede progress against this priority.

Mental Health and Wellbeing for Minority Ethnic CYP

In the context of cuts to mental health support with the discontinuation of 'Healthy Happy Minds' and reductions in ES funding, indicative research points to the potential for increasing unmet need among this population. Research in NI has found lower levels of belonging and higher levels of exclusion among European migrant, Chinese, Asian and Irish Traveller children compared with their White, settled Northern Irish peers (Biggart et al., 2009; 2013). Racism and discrimination, which are associated with poor mental health and lower academic engagement (Sapouna et al., 2022), are also widely reported among minority ethnic young people (Biggart et al., 2009; Bloomer et al., 2014; Loader et al., 2023; McMullen et al., 2020; Robertson, 2020). Studies indicate, further, that migrant children may also experience specific stressors associated with their migration and settlement experience, including communication and language barriers, peer relationship issues, isolation and loss of sense of belonging, cultural adjustment, and anxiety about schoolwork (Jones et al., 2018; Kernaghan, 2015; McMullen et al., 2020). Such risks are elevated among refugees and asylum-seekers: war-affected children are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, emotional and behavioural difficulties, while the uncertainties and deprivations of the asylum process can also negatively affect mental health (Ehnholt and Yule, 2006; McMullen et al., 2013, 2021).

Evidence suggests that schools are particularly appropriate sites for the provision of mental health support for minority ethnic children where this is required. Barriers to traditional mental health services – including stigma, transport difficulties, lack of trust and lack of knowledge of services – are reduced in schools (Fazel, 2015; Lavis, 2014; McMullen et al., 2020; 2021). School-based

programmes can also increase access to mental health support for children from minority ethnic backgrounds (Acosta Price et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2013), who, research indicates, are otherwise less likely to access such provision – particularly through early intervention services – than their white, settled peers (Education Policy Institute, 2017; Lavis, 2014). Research in NI has identified a demand for school-based support for migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children from both parents and teachers, particularly in the form of one-to-one or group counselling and guidance for parents to support their children through traumatic experiences (Kernaghan, 2015; McMullen et al., 2021).

While the impact assessment regarding the discontinuation of the Healthy Happy Minds programme indicated no particular detriment to children of different ethnic groups (DENI, 2023c), available research suggests that the withdrawal of such services may impact minority ethnic pupils in distinct ways. Indeed, recent work has argued for the extension of school-based provision and additional resourcing to increase its cultural responsiveness – for example, ensuring access to services among children and families who have less proficiency in English (McMullen et al., 2021). This is unlikely to be fulfilled in the context of proposed reductions to school-based mental health support.

The Significance of the Engage Programme for Minority Ethnic CYP

The Engage programme provided one-to-one or small-group teaching support to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on pupils' educational progress. Research suggests that children from Traveller, Roma and newcomer backgrounds experienced particularly significant learning loss during the pandemic (Lander et al., 2021; Loader et al., 2023). Reasons for this include families' limited access to or conversance with the technology required for home learning, lack of English language proficiency or low literacy among parents, and a lack of familiarity with the curriculum and school processes (Lander et al., 2021; Loader et al., 2023). With research also indicating a substantial increase in the learning gap between disadvantaged children and others following school closures in 2020 (Sharp et al., 2020), children from minority ethnic groups with above average rates of FSME are likely to have experienced greater learning loss than their peers.

The DENI's assessment of the impact of the discontinuation of the Engage programme reflects these findings, identifying that higher proportions of Traveller (39.1%) and newcomer (29%) children were supported by Engage funding when compared with the pupil population as a whole (26.3%) (DENI, 2023d). The withdrawal of Engage may thus have a disproportionate impact on these groups, potentially entrenching or increasing the achievement gaps identified prior to the pandemic (Loader et al., 2023).

Conclusions

While discussion in this section has addressed the impact of specific cuts on minority ethnic children and families, it is important also to consider the cumulative and intersecting effects of decreased funding on this population. Researchers argue, for example, that school-based support for wellbeing may be inadequate where children experience financial hardship at home (Ellis et al., 2013); likewise, parents' participation in their children's education and information-sharing about children's wellbeing will be better supported where English language classes are also available. Such examples point to the importance of a holistic approach to the allocation of funding to best meet the needs of minority ethnic children and their parents.

RECOMMENDATION: In assessing the impact of funding reductions, the Department for Education should take account of the high levels of disadvantage among particular minority ethnic and migrant groups and the disproportionate effects that cuts to services are likely to have on these groups. The Department should also recognise the interlinkages between these programmes and the risk that cuts to one area of service may affect families' ability to access and engage with other services.

Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

Professor Noel Purdy

The SEN Crisis

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) system in NI has been criticised in several recent reports, but the case for change dates back at least as far as the Department of Education's own 2009 consultation on "The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion" (DENI, 2009b). The rationale for this initial review almost 14 years ago centred on the year-on-year rise in the number of children with SEN, high levels of bureaucracy within schools and the Education and Library Boards, the lack of joined-up thinking and collaboration between government departments, the insufficient skills of teachers, and the rising cost of SEN provision. The ensuing painfully slow SEN review process led to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Act 2016 but, in the absence of an Assembly, the Act has still not been fully implemented, and it is arguably already outdated.

More recent criticisms of SEN provision in NI have included a report for the NI Assembly by the Comptroller and Auditor General (NI Audit Office, 2017) which again highlighted the annual rise in expenditure on SEN and questioned the extent to which the DENI and Education Authority (EA) were able to demonstrate efficient spending (based on EA's SEN spend of £217m in 2015-16). The NI Audit Office (NIAO) report made a series of 10 recommendations focusing on improving delivery of services and reporting and monitoring of SEN expenditure.

This was followed in 2020 by a follow-up "Impact Review of Special Educational Needs" (NIAO, 2020) which criticised the lack of progress in addressing the 10 recommendations. The report also noted that £311m had been spent by the EA on children with SEN in 2019-20, that 85% of statements of SEN had been issued outside the statutory timeframe of 26 weeks in 2019-20 and that there had been a 36% increase in the percentage of children with statements over the previous 9 years. The review added that '[t]here is a clear need for an urgent review and overhaul of the SEN processes in place within the EA' (p.3) and argued that 'the current funding of SEN services is not financially sustainable' (p.4). The review concluded that there was an urgent need for a 'systematic review of the SEN policies, processes, services and funding model to ensure the provision is sufficient to meet the needs of all children with SEN' (p.6).

A further substantial report entitled "Too Little, Too Late" was also published in 2020 by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY, 2020). This review also found a system 'under extreme pressure, finding it difficult to respond to the scale of need and the complexity of issues that children are presenting' (p.7). Using a children's rights framework, the NICCY research explored parents' perceptions of the SEN system and found, for instance, that in terms of 'Availability' only 1 in 8 parents felt that there were adequate facilities and services in place to meet the needs of all children and young people with SEN. Moreover, only 1 in 7 felt that children and young people with SEN receive a quality service that meets their needs ('Quality/Impact') while less than 1 in 5 believed that the SEN process was child-centred ('Acceptability'). NICCY's report made a further 40 recommendations to improve provision.

The following year, the NI Assembly's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) also turned its attention to SEN and expressed concerns in relation to the EA's governance and oversight arrangements and noting 'elements of dysfunctionality' (PAC, 2021). The PAC made a further 7 substantial recommendations, once again focusing on the effectiveness of SEN support and calling for more reliable information and data to allow the EA to improve the delivery of services. They also

expressed dismay that the EA was unable to explain why SEN rates were higher in NI compared to other UK jurisdictions.

EA Transformation Programme

Faced with such a raft of criticism, the EA embarked on a major Transformation Programme in 2020 to seek to address the criticisms made across these several reports, which contained around 200 recommendations in total. While there is evidence that improvements have been made to SEN provision in NI (e.g. only 9% of statements now take longer than 26 weeks, compared to 85% before – see DENI, 2023e) and that local phase-specific multi-disciplinary teams are beginning to make a real difference, the core problem remains that the current SEN system is still not meeting the needs of all children and young people with SEN, and that it is financially unsustainable in its current form. DENI has therefore recently embarked on an End-to-End review of SEN, as an overarching piece to bring together the work of the EA Transformation Programme in a more timely manner and to explore other delivery options.

The commencement of DENI's End-to-End Review has coincided with the publication of the latest report on SEN provision in NI. The "Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes" (DENI, 2023e) was conducted by Ipsos, and has revealed a continued rise in EA's SEN expenditure to £417m in 2021-22 and an estimated £490m in 2022-23, more than double the annual expenditure of £217 in 2015-16 (as cited in DENI, 2009b). The Ipsos report also revealed that while the total number of pupils with SEN has fallen over the past 5 years by 18% from 76,644 to 62,650 (or from 23.2% to 18.4% of the school population), the number of pupils with statements of SEN has increased by 24% from 17,709 to 21,956 (or from 5.4% to 6.4% of the school population). The number of classroom assistant FTEs (full-time equivalents) has similarly grown over the past 5 years by 41% from 4,740 to 6695, while the number of educational psychology staff (FTEs) has fallen by 26% from 136 to 101 in the past 5 years. The report has highlighted a sense of frustration among many in the education sector and parents at the lack of 'evidence of change' (p.153) and has called for DENI to set in place a plan within a year 'that will set out the actions that will be delivered to implement transformational change to SEN and the wider education system within reasonable timescales' (p.156).

The wealth of evidence presented in the various reports cited above highlight a system of SEN provision in NI which has been in crisis long before the current round of education funding cuts. Indeed, this litany of highly critical reports over the past 14 years have repeatedly confirmed that the SEN system has been showing signs of strain for many years, but that the SEN review which started with the 2009 consultation has still failed to address the challenges in any meaningful way. The latest report, the 'Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes' (DENI, 2023e) simply confirms what previous reports have already shown: that the system is still not meeting the needs of children, that the model of provision is financially unsustainable, and that an urgent rethink is needed to prevent the system from total collapse. There is also evidence (NICCY, 2020) that many parents seek a statement of SEN for their child as they know that this will provide statutory support in the absence of existing adequate classroom support.

The Compound Impacts of the Cuts

Against such a challenging backdrop of financial strain and policy paralysis, recent reports show that the already stretched special school sector in NI is simply unable to accommodate the 853 additional children with severe learning difficulties who require special school provision in September 2023 – this would represent 140 additional special school classes across 39 existing

special schools. By way of response the EA has written to mainstream primary schools to ask them to consider opening specialist units for children with severe learning difficulties (Meredith, 2023b). Such schools would be linked as ‘satellites’ to existing and neighbouring special schools, but significant concerns remain regarding the adequacy of provision, the availability of adequately trained teachers and classroom assistants, and the level of resourcing and support available in these remote locations to meet the needs of children with often complex learning, behavioural and medical difficulties. It seems more than likely that large numbers of children with severe learning difficulties will be unplaced in September 2023.

Meanwhile, DENI has also announced that the overall funding to schools to pay for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) has been halved from £22m last year to £11 in 2023-24. This will doubtless result in less substitute cover for schools to release their SENCOs from whole class teaching responsibilities to devote to their already busy role in coordinating the SEN provision across the school (Meredith, 2023c). Finally, and most recently, in June 2023, the EA has asked for almost 90 of its staff to volunteer to move to work in SEN support to cope with increasing demand (Meredith, 2023d).

Conclusions

Against this backdrop, the Department of Health (2023) has recently published figures showing that 5% of school-aged children in NI will be autistic in 2022-23 (compared to just 1.2% in 2008-09), of whom 59% have statements. In addition, the report found that the rate of autism in school aged children in the 10% most deprived areas was 40% higher than the NI average. The challenges facing children with SEN in NI are therefore immense, and so it is deeply disappointing and short-sighted to hear that funding for the EA’s Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Transformation Programme (as earmarked funds) has also been cut by 50% in 2023/24. Consequently, as EA’s Sara Long explained to the NI Affairs Committee on 24 May, this ‘will absolutely temper our ambition and the speed of our delivery’ (Long, 2023) in pushing through the much needed reform agenda.

RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Education should prioritise its End-to-End Review of SEN in NI, and that this would facilitate an urgent evidence-based root and branch reform of SEN policy and practice including the requisite funding to complete the Education Authority’s SEND Transformation Programme as soon as possible. Following 15 years of protracted SEN review, we recommend further that ambitious SMART targets are set, monitored and reported for the delivery of real change, prioritising children’s needs and improving the delivery of services by the EA, health professionals, schools, Initial Teacher Education providers and others.

Educational Infrastructure

Professor Noel Purdy (Stranmillis University College)

Schools Estate

Another area impacted by the recent budget cuts is the deteriorating condition of the schools estate in NI. The Education Authority (EA) has estimated that the backlog of maintenance works is in the region of £500m, and with no funding currently available to address these works, the backlog continues to grow year on year.

As recently as March 2022 Education Minister Michelle McIlveen had announced to the Assembly that 28 post-primary schools in NI could 'advance in planning' under the Major Capital Works Programme, representing an estimated capital investment of £794m that would benefit over 25,000 pupils across the schools estate. She noted however that this was a lengthy process, that construction spend would not be realised until the end of the decade at the earliest, and that it was designed to ensure a 'steady pipeline of projects in design'. Nonetheless, in her optimistic statement Minister McIlveen spoke of the importance of investment in school buildings as contributing to the education of children and young people:

'I have visited many schools and witnessed first-hand not only the tremendous work that takes place in each and every school, but also the need for an appropriate level of investment in the fabric of our schools, whether this is a new building, the extension and refurbishment of existing school buildings, or through a programme of smaller scale minor capital works. Such investment is essential to provide the first class educational experience our pupils, staff and wider school communities both deserve and need to ensure our young people can achieve their full potential'. (McIlveen, 2022)

This optimism had however dissipated by April 2023 when DENI's Director of Investment and Infrastructure, Dr Suzanne Kingon, wrote to schools to inform them that they had 'little option at this time but to pause the procurement exercise for Integrated Consultant Teams for all major capital works projects announced in March 2022'. It was noted the decision had 'not been taken lightly' and that the Department was 'acutely aware of the pressing need for investment at your school' (S.Kingon, personal communication, 25 April 2023).

Capital Works

The Education Authority (EA), which almost exclusively delivers the full design and construction project management service for construction works in all sectors has been advised not to expect to be asked to submit bids for further additional capital works for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the EA's major capital allocation for controlled sector schools in 2023-24 is £33.4m for contractually committed project only, while for smaller School Enhancement Programme (SEP) projects the budget is just £1.5m.

Investment in minor capital projects (<£1m), managed by the EA, has similarly been drastically cut. The last call for applications for funding in 2017 led to 6,500 applications of which to date only 550 have been awarded funding to proceed. For 2023-24 the EA plans to deliver only a limited number of minor works projects that are either contractually committed from 2022-23 or are to facilitate the placement of children for September 2023. However, DENI has awarded EA only £40m for minor works in 2023-24, despite contractual commitments and other pressures that are

deemed to be unavoidable amounting to over £75m. Unsurprisingly, the EA will not be making any fresh calls to schools for applications for minor capital works in the foreseeable future.

While the backlog of investment in the NI schools estate impacts on children in all phases of education across all sectors, it is also clear that schools in disadvantaged areas are disproportionately impacted. Even before the current crisis, in December 2018, Emma Quinn, principal of Rathcoole Primary School, reported that conditions at her school were unsatisfactory but her budget simply didn't allow room for maintenance costs. Consequently, parents and members of the public had been making donations and had been offering to carry out free repair work, as Emma Quinn explained:

'The toilets at the minute in the school throughout are generally closed, due to them either being broken or due to broken toilet seats. My concern is that a lot of this funding needs to come out of school money and we just don't have the funding there to be able to do it'.
(Fitzpatrick, 2018)

The School Environment and Student Achievement

Research in NI into the importance of school climate and its impact on student achievement and wellbeing is scarce, but in one recent review of the international research literature, Kutsyruruba et al. (2015) developed a new categorisation of school climate dimensions which comprises the physical, social and academic. They cite several studies which point to the positive relationship between the condition of the school and student achievement (O'Neill and Oates, 2001). Conversely, other studies suggest that school buildings in a poor state of repair lead to reduced learning (Buckley et al., 2004). Uline and Tscannen-Moran (2008) further suggest that specific features of school learning environments that are related to student achievement include the age of the building, climate control, indoor air quality, lighting, acoustics, design and overall impression. A number of studies suggest a clear link between the environmental quality of schools, attitudes of pupils and staff, teaching and learning behaviours, and, consequently, educational attainment (Berry, 2012; Marzano, 2003; Rutter et al., 1979; Wentzel and Watkins, 2002).

The condition of school buildings has also been found to impact on teachers/school staff. One US study found, for instance, that teacher retention/attrition decisions were related to the quality of school facilities, even when other factors were controlled for (Buckley et al., 2004). Teachers who perceived that the condition of the buildings had a negative impact on their health were more likely to seek employment in other schools/areas. Uline and Tscannen-Moran (2008) conclude that demotivated teachers teach less enthusiastically in buildings which are shabby or inadequate, further impacting on student learning.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is apparent from the research that a school's physical climate can have a direct impact on learning and attainment, and that, self-evidently, schools in more disadvantaged areas are less likely to be able to compensate for inadequate government funding through local fundraising or parental contributions, further exacerbating the social inequities of wider society. Furthermore, evidence from international research confirms local, anecdotal experience that the condition of our schools estate sends a very clear message to the local community about the value placed on education and the importance of learning. Conversely, where buildings are left to deteriorate to the extent that children and staff are learning and teaching in cold, damp, shabby and (at times) unsafe accommodation, the message to that learning community is that priorities

lie elsewhere and that education is not worth the investment. As Uline and Tscannen-Moran (2008, p.67) rightly note, the walls speak volumes:

'The manner in which a school building is designed, managed, and maintained sends a message to its occupants and the community beyond, speaking volumes about the value placed on activities transpiring within its walls. The physical properties of a school building are the tangible context within which teaching and learning take place (Willower, 1988). We have the capacity to influence these properties practically and artfully on behalf of the students and teachers whose performance we wish to support and improve'.

RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Education NI should recognise the role that the learning environment plays in facilitating pupil attitudes, behaviour and attainment as well as staff retention, and that the Department of Education NI restores and extends their financial commitment to investing in the schools estate, addressing the chronic maintenance backlog and committing to an ambitious capital build programme.

Digital Access for Children and Young People

Professor Noel Purdy (Stranmillis University College)

It was reported on 25th April 2023 (Meredith, 2023) that the provision of additional digital devices to disadvantaged schools and families was being “paused”. More than ever before, not having digital access means not having access to fundamental aspects of modern life, such as accessing key public services like social security and healthcare, accessing banking, making payments and bookings, listening to music, playing games, interacting with friends and family, and (increasingly) accessing learning resources. Digital access is now a basic right, as confirmed by General Comment 25 of the UNCRC:

‘The rights of every child must be respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment. Innovations in digital technologies affect children’s lives and their rights in ways that are wide-ranging and interdependent, even where children do not themselves access the Internet. Meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights. However, if digital inclusion is not achieved, existing inequalities are likely to increase, and new ones may arise’ (United Nations, 2021).

Digital poverty has been defined as ‘the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to’ (Digital Poverty Alliance, 2022) and it is acknowledged that this inability to interact online includes access to devices and the internet, but also digital knowledge and skills to enable effective interaction. The challenge of digital poverty is not new (e.g. Ofcom, 2019) but its importance was thrust into the national spotlight through the two extended periods of homeschooling (March-June 2020 and January-March 2021) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most children were forced to learn at home and became reliant on digital learning platforms such as Google Classroom to access learning resources.

An initial blogpost just three weeks after the first lockdown first highlighted the initial signs of the likely inequality of homeschooling as disadvantaged families were ‘left to their own devices’ (Purdy, 2020). Evidence from a number of subsequent research studies conducted through the pandemic in NI (e.g. Purdy et al., 2021a; Walsh et al., 2020) confirmed this prediction and reported socially mediated experiences of homeschooling. For instance, Purdy et al. (2021a) found that children from households in the lowest income band were three times more likely to have no printer than children from households in the highest income band (30% vs 11%) and their parents/carers were considerably more likely to feel that the costs of printing (in terms of paper and ink) prevented them from using their printer (25% vs 3%). Children from low-income homes were also more likely to have to share a digital device and/or wait to be able to go online, and were less likely to report fast internet speeds (see Figure 23 below – Purdy et al., 2021a).

Geographical analysis also reveals that internet connectivity is worst in rural areas, with many parents reporting poor internet speeds and broadband connectivity in rural areas (Purdy et al., 2021a; Walsh et al., 2020). The low levels of rural connectivity have been confirmed in Ofcom’s most recent Connected Nations report (Ofcom, 2022) which found that 86% of rural residential properties in the UK can now access superfast broadband, but this drops to 84% in Wales, 76% in Scotland, and 82% in NI. Ofcom also reported that 9,000 premises in NI are still unable to access a ‘decent broadband service’ from either fixed or fixed wireless networks. Ofcom’s figures show a steady improvement in digital access over recent years, the likely result of Project Stratum, the NI Executive’s project which aims to enhance internet connectivity across NI. The contract

was awarded in November 2020 with work expected to start immediately and implementation will run until March 2024 (Department for the Economy, 2023).

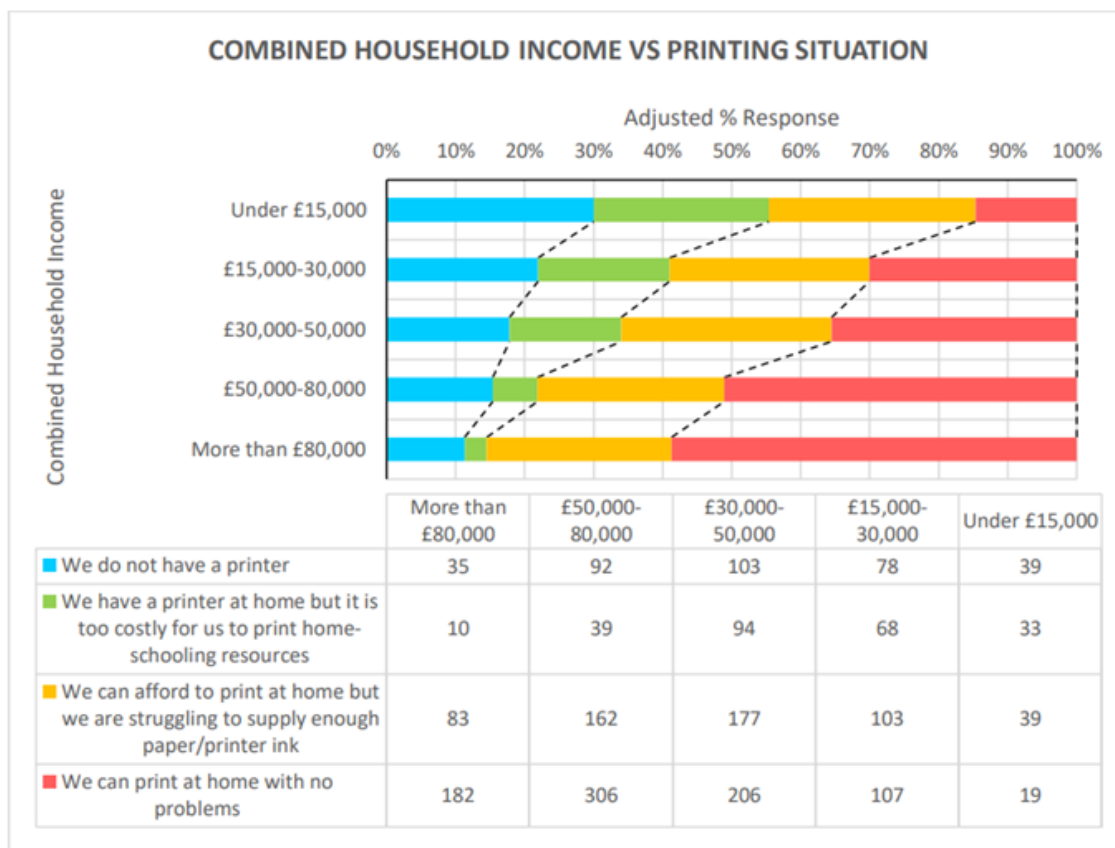


Figure 23: Combined household income compared with printing situation

Under Key Area 3 of *A Fair Start* (Purdy et al., 2021b) it was noted that ‘Covid-19 has highlighted the disparity between families who can easily access curriculum resources and families who cannot’ adding that ‘[t]here are issues of rural isolation’. In response, action x proposed that ‘DE [Department for the Economy] should expand and accelerate its delivery of digital devices / broadband to learners so that there is equitable access to learning. An investment of £1m per annum would mean c.3,000 pupils per year would have access to such devices’. In response, DE has reported that £1m was secured in 2021/22 and a further £1m in 2022/23.

In the most recently published progress report on the implementation of *A Fair Start* (DENI, 2022), DENI reported that 4095 digital devices had been delivered to 102 schools by December 2022 in Phase 1 of the programme, and that 51 of the 102 schools had already completed a Digital Devices Plan which will help to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. The 4095 devices comprised 1186 iPads, 1095 Chromebooks and 1759 MS Surfaces SEs, while the schools included 70 primary schools, 21 post-primary schools (including EOTAS) and 9 special schools. Phase 1 focused on schools with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) of 49.5% or above. Phase 2 (for schools with FSME of 39.5-49.4%) and Phase 3 (for schools with FSME of 29.5-39.4%) were ‘likely to be launched in Winter 2022’. Initial very positive feedback from schools was cited in the progress report:

'Love this idea and this will greatly help children's learning'

'These additional resources will be used to support those most vulnerable'

'This is a great opportunity to enhance the teaching and learning of SLD pupils'

'This would be a massive help to our children'

'These devices could help their (pupils') learning both in school and at home and would be of enormous benefit to them'

The impact of the "pause" to funding for digital devices will undoubtedly most disadvantage those children and young people who come from low-income families, where we know that their digital access already falls behind that of their wealthier peers, who are, by contrast, more likely to enjoy faster broadband speeds, and are more likely to have more devices and access to printing. While the use of remote digital learning platforms (such as Google Classroom) grew out of necessity through the pandemic, anecdotal evidence from local schools would suggest that schools have continued to use such platforms (as well as apps such as SeeSaw) on a daily basis, with teachers posting homework tasks online, requiring homework to be uploaded and asking for worksheets or other documents to be printed.

It is therefore clear that the pausing of the digital devices scheme by DE, which is targeted at high FSME schools, will disproportionately affect disadvantaged children and young people, exacerbating digital poverty and perpetuating the digital exclusion of those on low incomes in NI at a time when the ongoing cost of living crisis is making it even harder for such families to afford digital devices (including printers and ink) and internet connectivity.

RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Education NI should reinstate funding for its digital devices programme as a matter of urgency to provide equitable access to online learning for all children and young people, irrespective of social background.

Conclusion

This rapid response report has sought to expose the far-reaching and serious consequences of the cuts to the education budget. It has outlined, using extensive evidence, that those children who are most disadvantaged will most acutely feel the pain of this budget laid down by the Secretary of State for NI, Chris Heaton-Harris MP. This is particularly evident when we look at the potentially compounding impacts of many children and young people (CYP) losing access to not one but a wide range of services or support provisions. Furthermore, the budget drives a wedge between equality of funding for schools in NI and the rest of the UK.

Murray indicates that there are serious questions to be asked about the constitutional propriety of requiring senior civil servants, who are not accountable to the electorate, to decide where the slices should be made, with reference to scant NIO guidance, which is open to multiple interpretations, as demonstrated by the Permanent Secretary's decision to reverse cuts to Early Years Schemes and Youth Programmes.

On a local policy level, these cuts vastly undermine the aims and objectives underpinning *A Fair Start* which was driven by the will of our political leaders to address persistent educational underachievement and disadvantage in the education system and to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed and flourish. Furthermore, with regard to international rights standards, the cuts seriously denigrate children's rights as enshrined in the UNCRC which is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, ratified by the UK in 1991 (Unicef, 1990).

Orr argues that the disadvantage attainment gap will widen as a result of the cuts, bearing in mind that the gap between more affluent children and disadvantaged children is already 19.1 percentage points for a 5 year old child (Gov.UK, 2022). NI statistics demonstrate the culmination of educational disadvantage. At GCSE level, data shows that there is a 29 percentage point attainment gap between pupils who are and who are not FSME, measured by the proportion of young people obtaining at least five GCSEs A*-C (or equivalent) including English and maths (NIAO, 2021). This attainment gap persists into employment and damages NI's prospects of achieving economic prosperity, as young people are leaving school without the skills required to support labour needs. Fitzpatrick emphasises the immediate consequences of the removal of the Holiday Hunger Scheme for CYP in poverty, at a time when food inflation is at a record high (ONS, 2023). These pressures will be further heightened by school uniform requirements. The current grant payment is inadequate and falls below the levels of support available in England, Scotland and Wales. More families will be pushed towards charitable provision, which will struggle to meet the anticipated explosion in demand.

McMullen highlights research which shows that children in NI are more likely to suffer from poor mental health (25%) than their peers in England, Scotland and Wales; this is associated with high rates of suicide among our CYP. These problems are compounded by the legacy of the conflict and economic deprivation which has intensified during the current economic crisis. Despite mental health support for CYP in NI being deemed inadequate, DENI have been forced to cut the primary counselling programme, Healthy Happy Minds. This cut, taken with the other cuts described, is likely to deepen the mental health crisis for our CYP with significant repercussions for the attainment gap, but also for school staff who are working in an unsustainable environment.

Simms discusses the importance of early and universal access to learning resources for infants and the benefits of facilitating shared book reading for parents and their children. The removal of the Book Start Scheme for babies will distinctly disadvantage infants in NI who will be the only

children in the UK who will be prevented from accessing these important, evidence-based resources. While McCartney and McConnell welcome the reversal of cuts to key Early Years programmes, they also catalogue the extent of long-term neglect in prioritising Early Years provision in NI, particularly the failure to better recognise the importance of the work in the pay and conditions of Early Years workers; the need to develop workforce capacity and skills and the lack of a resourced childcare strategy, which is constraining workforce participation, particularly for women who continue to maintain the overriding burden of care for children.

Loader outlines the implications of the cuts for Minority Ethnic CYP, particularly for those children and parents who require support with learning the English language. Any reduction to the Extended Schools scheme will have a disproportionate impact on newcomer pupils. Furthermore, CYP from minority ethnic communities face real challenges in terms of maintaining good levels of mental health and wellbeing. Research drawn upon by Loader indicates that the consequences will be distinct and significant, particularly in terms of efforts to foster cultural responsiveness. Minority ethnic CYP also benefited most substantially from the Engage Programme, with research indicating that children from this group have experienced greater learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The cumulative and intersecting nature of the funding cuts will have far-reaching consequences for integration and social mobility for minority ethnic communities.

Purdy provides a stark account of the failure to implement significant transformation of education for children with SEN, despite the rise in the number of children who need support over the last two decades and the unsustainable funding model. Several recent reports have confirmed that the SEN system in NI was already on the brink of collapse before these latest cuts were announced. At the centre of the crisis are 853 children with severe learning difficulties who require a special school place for September 2023 and who have a right to access educational provision that meets their individual needs - on the same terms as those who do not have SEN. It is therefore both disturbing and unacceptable that EA's SEND Transformation Programme, which had been showing encouraging signs of success, has been cut by 50% for the 2023/24 funding period.

Schools also face considerable challenges in maintaining their school estate to ensure safe, warm, comfortable and well-equipped learning environments. Despite existing maintenance backlogs, Purdy highlights how investment in capital spend and essential maintenance for schools has been drastically cut. Self-evidently, schools in disadvantaged areas will be less likely to mitigate the impacts of this through parental/community contributions thus further exacerbating social and educational inequality. Purdy also outlines the need for disadvantaged CYP to access digital devices in order to maintain participation in a rapidly transforming world, where schools are increasing their engagement with technology to facilitate teaching and learning. Evidence shows that the Digital Devices Scheme mitigated digital poverty by providing thousands of devices to those in need. As low-income families focus on affording basics such as food, fuel and transport, there will be less household resources available to purchase digital devices.

The authors conclude that the cuts executed will have a devastating impact on those children most vulnerable and furthest from opportunity in NI. Collectively, we are calling for the current NI budget to be withdrawn, for funding to be maintained at 2022/23 levels, with additional funding allocated to take account of the impact of inflation on the operation of departments.

It is crucial that policy makers and those in power who make decisions that directly impact the lives of CYP consult widely and meaningfully with them. In line with the Lundy Model (2014) children must be provided with the opportunity to express a view, to be facilitated to express their views and their views should be listened to and acted upon. Finally, we strongly believe that policy

decisions around funding allocations should be reserved solely for Ministers, who have been elected to represent the interests and needs of people in NI, including all of our children and young people, subject to oversight by NI's elected representatives.

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