

17 October 2022

Dear Ministers,

As paediatricians, we are deeply concerned by growing child health inequalities in Northern Ireland and write to urge you to commit to taking all steps toward prioritising a robust, overarching NI Executive anti-poverty strategy to reduce poverty within our communities, and the child health inequalities it causes. The most recent Health Inequalities Annual Report highlights growing obesity and overweight among primary 1 children, increase in low birth weight and a drop in dental registrations over the period analysed within the region's most deprived areas.

Evidence shows that poverty is a key driving factor of health inequalities. Indeed, through our own practice, we see the effects of poverty manifest in the poor physical and mental health of children and young people from deprived backgrounds.

The impacts of poverty and child health inequality will follow a child through their life, thus, the issues we see today will impact the future health of the NI population, our economic potential and will cost more to address in the future. Recovery post-COVID-19 restrictions, the rising costs of living and long waiting times to access health and care services are exacerbating the problem.

We welcome the work current Ministers have been undertaking in lieu of a functioning Executive, including ensuring free school meal allowance over summer 2022 to help ameliorate holiday hunger. We also note that reducing health inequalities is a core feature of the 2021 draft Programme for Government. However, we currently lack an overarching strategy which sets specific targets to reduce child poverty and unequal health outcomes. We therefore urge you to take the following steps:

- Prioritise the publication of an overarching NI Executive anti-poverty strategy and associated funding plan which places children and young people at the centre. There should be robust health focused outcomes and indicators aimed at children and young people
- Prioritise the formation of the Executive, and therefore the commitments made in New Decade, New Approach the draft Programme for Government, and the Making Life Better Framework, particularly next steps in reducing health inequalities
- Ensure the Children and Young People's Strategy 3 Year Delivery Plan encompasses an 'area of greatest focus' pertaining to the physical health of all children in NI so that poverty and inequality indicators can be appropriately joined up

In Northern Ireland we have an opportunity to work together toward improving this, and the next generation's life chances – we urge you to seize it.

Yours sincerely,

**Dr Ray Nethercott, Officer for Ireland, RCPCH**  
**alongside 26 members of the child health workforce in Northern Ireland.**