

Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
Belfast

2 May 2023

Sent by email to: correspondence@nio.gov.uk

Cc: Permanent Secretary for Education, Permanent Secretary for Health, NI Affairs Committee

Dear Mr Heaton-Harris,

I write to you on behalf of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) to convey the serious concerns of our membership in Northern Ireland, of the impact of the inadequate budgetary envelope on services which provide crucial support to children, young people and families.

As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, we implore you to set a meaningful budget which provides enough resource for children's services across DEL spend so that children and families are not left behind.

Currently 23% of children are living in poverty in Northern Ireland according to last year statistics, and there has been a 194% increase in reliance on foodbanks [since 2017/18](#). Without your help and dedication to children and the future of our society, the future looks bleak.

Families are already suffering as funding for key programmes are rolled back

In recent weeks there have been a number of roll backs, or discontinued programmes including:

- **The Holiday Food Grant Scheme**
 - As of 31 March 2023, the highly welcomed 'School Holiday Food Grant' scheme which provided a grant of £27 per fortnight, per child, during school holidays, to eligible low-income households where children are entitled to Free School Meals, has been disbanded.
- **The Engage Programme**
 - A [widely supported programme](#) to limit any COVID-19 related disruption on children and young people across the education system has been removed. It was originally accepted that the programme should continue in an expanded form in 23/24.
- **The Healthy Happy Minds pilot counselling and therapeutic support programme**
 - This was due to [support to the mental health needs of our primary school aged children](#) suffering from trauma - particularly useful at this age before these traumas became entrenched and potentially causing more serious mental health concerns in future.
- **The Extended Schools Programme**
 - This offers [disadvantaged areas additional services](#) outside of the normal school day to help meet the learning and development needs of pupils, their families and local communities.
 - In recent times, this funding was utilised to offset the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis and buy-in therapeutic services.

Difficulties on the policy horizon that will detrimentally impact children and families

We are aware of a number of policy discussions that if they go ahead will harm children, including:

- **Stopping the [roll out of digital devices](#) as envisaged in the 'Fair Start Programme'.** We understand this important programme is to be stopped. This may have the undesirable effect of disenfranchising our most vulnerable children from access to their education.
- **The [Northern Ireland Budget Act](#).** We understand that the current allocation leaves Executive Departments in a position where they cannot maintain the status quo under DEL spend, while incorporating any kind of transformation, and discretionary spend is almost impossible. We strongly support the [letter](#) from the NI Public Sector Chairs Forum detailing that further clarity is needed to avoid counter-strategic cuts which will result in irreversible loss of staff and services.
- **Budget shortfalls.** In a health system where even with a sustained productivity and efficiency drive, the 23/24 budget was estimated to be [£300m short of estimated funding requirements](#), the clarification that this will be a flat-cash allocation effectively means real time cuts – it is unclear what this means for paediatrics but at minimum, will require medium and high impact savings across the piece, with adverse consequences for an already highly pressurised health and care system.
- **Children are waiting longer for the services they need.** This includes [outpatients](#) and [Emergency Departments](#). Cuts to support services may translate to health needs as a result. The Urgent and Emergency care review in NI also indicated that that the 0-19 age group are attending EDs inappropriately. Furthermore, [community paediatrics](#) is in crisis with unduly long diagnostic wait times and between 2021 and 2022 there was a 33% [increase](#) in the number of children waiting for an autism assessment. Additionally, expected detrimental cuts to Special Educational Needs provision will only exacerbate issues for our vulnerable children.

The impact of cuts on children cannot be understated

Children are worth investing in. They are the future of our society. However, it is our fear that the impact of cuts on children's services could be irreversible. Recently, the Education Authority board iterated that it cannot make expected savings without ["highly unacceptable and detrimental risks"](#) to children and young people.

These cuts will impact our most vulnerable children and young people, entrenching inequality and decimating what could have been bright futures. Moreover, many of these individual children and young people will be impacted by multiple cuts to multiple services.

The UK Government has the opportunity to make a serious difference in Northern Ireland

As paediatricians, we can see these current unrealistic cuts will have a disproportionate effect on children and young people's services, transitions to adult care, the way they experience their lives including journey to adulthood and as they become taxpayers. They deserve the same rights as their peers in the rest of the UK and beyond.

We implore you to allocate an adequate financial envelope which enables the delivery of funding for children and young people's services in Northern Ireland, so that further programmes are not cut, and to further re-invest in our future.

We look forward to your response and do let us know if you would like a direct meeting.

Sincerely,



Dr Ray Nethercott, Officer for Ireland obo the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child health