

**DIRECTOR OF TRANSPORT AND
FOOD IN SCHOOLS**



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Dear Ms McLornan

Thank you for your letter of 13 October 2023 to Dr Mark Browne regarding the Right to Food. I have been asked to reply on the Permanent Secretary's behalf.

The Department of Education recognises the challenges that are being experienced by many families in accessing affordable and nutritious food. It also understands the importance of the role played by the Department of Education as part of cross-departmental work to tackle food poverty, led by the Department for Communities as the lead department in the development of the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy. This strategy will aim to bring focus to the Executive's collective efforts to tackle the root causes of poverty and impacts of inequality.

The issue of holiday hunger for children of school age will continue to be considered in the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. Since July 2020, on behalf of the Executive, the Department of Education had been in receipt of additional ring-fenced funding to facilitate payment of the School Holiday Food Grants (SHFG) payment scheme. This reflected the urgency of this scheme being developed in the early stages of the pandemic and the ability of the Education Authority to use the payment mechanisms already in place for its provision of uniform grant payments to low-income families. From April 2023 this additional ringfenced funding ended and therefore SHFG could no longer be made.

The Department recognises the important support the SHFG scheme has provided for low-income families who are struggling financially, particularly with recent cost of living rises and realises the disappointment this will have been for parents. It was therefore with great reluctance that the Department had no alternative to discontinuing the SHFG scheme from 31 March 2023.

Based on the budget allocated by the Secretary of State for 2023-24, there remains an estimated funding gap for the Department of Education in the region of £300m and the Department is currently facing an extremely challenging financial position.

Faced with this extremely challenging financial position, in addition to the decision on the SHFG scheme, the Department has taken significant decisions including reductions to the Aggregated Schools' Budget, the Education Authority's Block Grant and the cessation of the Engage and Healthy Happy Minds schemes from the end of March 2023.

The Department recently published an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) Consultation Report on the 2023-24 Resource Budget. In view of the available budget, decisions could not be delayed until the full completion of an EQIA. In addition, the financial constraints are at a level that will significantly inhibit the Department's ability to reinstate funding, even where impacts are substantial.

The EQIA will enable the Department to better assess the impacts of the budget; and provide valuable insight to inform future decisions should additional funding become available. Responses received during the consultation period are being considered and it is anticipated that the final consultation report will be published on the DE website in due course.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret Rose McNaughton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

MARGARET ROSE McNAUGHTON
Director of Transport and Food in Schools