

## BCPP News Policy Analysis

In this edition of BCPP News, we shine a light on the youth sector and share stories from BCPP projects working with children and young people across Northern Ireland. To set the context for these stories we highlight the challenges for the youth sector and the current policy environment.

### NI punishment budget crippling our most disadvantaged children

We are currently experiencing a perfect storm; a cost-of-living crisis, increased levels of child poverty, rising inflation and constant cuts decimating vital services. In Northern Ireland, more than one in five children live in Poverty (Loughborough University, 2023). Poverty harms children's health and damages their full

potential. Children's health and development outcomes follow a social gradient; the further up the socioeconomic ladder, the better their health outcomes will be. This year's Health Inequalities report paints a dire picture of children's health as research shows over the last five years, the inequality gap in the proportion of Primary 1 children classified as obese increased from 45% to 93% due to the rise in obesity rates in the most deprived areas, while rates in the least deprived areas saw no notable change. Early interventions help narrow inequality gaps between children from socially disadvantaged areas.

Inequitable access to services increases inequities during the early years of a child's life, as families most in need are least able to access them.

Our youth service is faced with never-ending cuts to early intervention and prevention services which will have a devastating impact on our children's ability to flourish and reach their full potential. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to do worse at school, earn less as adults and suffer poorer health. A Fair Start Funding for 2023-24 which was set up to close the educational attainment gap between socially disadvantaged children has now been significantly reduced from £21 million to £2.5 million. Cancellation of the Healthy Happy Minds programme was another cut which will have disastrous consequences for primary school children that rely on counselling to improve their wellbeing. This preventative funding also helped to mitigate the risk of children developing mental ill health as adults. NI has the highest rate of mental illness in the whole of the UK, investment in early intervention for mental health should be top of the policy agenda due to the unique, historical needs of our population.

Another harsh cut was the axe to Extended Schools Funding which enabled schools in disadvantaged communities to provide pupils with a free breakfast so that they were nourished and set up for the school day. This cut will disproportionately impact children



from disadvantaged backgrounds as they will struggle to concentrate without a good breakfast that may not have been available at home. Inequalities are intersected, they do not exist in isolation. Disadvantage continues to persist from childhood to adulthood, if we look at the example of employment, research highlights those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to be employed and earn 20% less than those from affluent backgrounds, and report worse health (OECD, 2022).

Investment in early childhood development and learning programmes for disadvantaged children can strengthen our workforce, grow our economy and reduce public spending. Instead of cutting vital programmes that help target educational underachievement, we need to narrow inequality gaps by taking a proactive approach to cognitive and social skill development through investments in early childhood programmes. Lack of investment in early intervention and prevention services will have long-term financial consequences, as research reports the cost of late intervention is a staggering £546 million per year to the public sector (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018). Heckman's 2012 analysis of early intervention shows that lack of investment in services that target nutrition, early education and health leads to serious cardiovascular and metabolic diseases such as stroke and diabetes in later life.

These summer months will be particularly challenging for many families as they will be faced with tortuous decisions like turning their heating on or eating due to the soaring energy costs and the rise in food inflation. The cost of food is gravely concerning, increasing by 18%, the fastest pace in over 40 years (ONS, 2023). Summer should be a happy time for families to create memories and enjoy quality time together, however, it is another financial pressure due to the cost-of-living crisis. With the recent decision to cut free school meal payments, 93,300 children will be adversely impacted with many children experiencing holiday hunger as a result. It is not surprising that new research from Save the Children (2023) revealed that 9 in 10 low-income parents in Northern Ireland say they are having to cut back on essential spending for themselves this summer to provide for their children. The impact of these severe cuts will cause chronic stress and anxiety to thousands of families in Northern Ireland.

This year's budget is like a punishment budget as it continues to have the worst impact on our most vulnerable groups. Significant investment is needed to tackle child poverty. Continuous cuts to vital services do nothing to prevent or reduce our growing social and health inequalities in Northern Ireland, rather they exacerbate inequality gaps. Our children deserve better, we urgently need an anti-poverty strategy to tackle the root causes of poverty!

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