

What is the cost of a healthy food basket in Northern Ireland in 2018?



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Executive summary

Aim

This research calculates the cost of a Minimum Essential Food Basket for 4 household types with low income scenarios in Northern Ireland in 2018. Previous research was undertaken in 2014⁽¹⁾ and 2016⁽²⁾ with members of the public in multiple focus groups across Northern Ireland to agree what should be included in a minimum essential, nutritionally adequate and socially acceptable food basket.

Method

This research uses Consensual Budget Standards methodology to establish the average weekly cost of the food element of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) for 4 household types in Northern Ireland adjusted to reflect food costs in 2018. Households included were:

- Two-parents, 2 children (pre-school and primary school age)
- Two-parents, 2 children (primary and secondary school age)
- One-parent, 2 children (pre-school and primary school age)
- Pensioner female living alone.

A low income scenario was used to establish the percentage of take-home pay spent on a healthy food basket for the household types listed above. For example; a working-age household where one adult was employed, the income source applied was social welfare payments and/or the National Living Wage (NLW), the state pension was used for a pensioner.

The 'UK Consumer Price Index data' was used to update the price for 2018. Income calculations were carried out by the authors, informed by government websites¹ and the online calculator www.entitledto.co.uk.

¹ Both gov.uk and nidirect.gov.uk were used for details of State Benefits, Income Tax and National Insurance, Universal Credit, Child Benefit, State Pension, Pension Credit, Winter Fuel Payment, Rate Relief and Housing Benefit.

Key findings

Table 1 presents the data on costs (as an absolute value in pounds sterling (£) and as a proportion of take-home income) of the acceptable and healthy food basket for 4 low-income households.

- The cost of the minimum essential food basket increased by between 4.2% and 4.6% for households from 2016 to 2018.

Table 1: Weekly cost of a weekly minimum essential food basket (£) and cost of basket as a percentage of take-home income for 4 household types in Northern Ireland in 2016 and 2018

Household type	Cost of food basket per week			Income scenario	Food basket cost as a % of take-home income	
	2016	2018	% change		2016	2018
Two parents & 2 children (pre-school & primary school)	115	120	+4.4	State benefit	33	34
				One adult employed earning National Living Wage	24	26
Two parents & 2 children (primary & secondary school)	153	159	+4.2	State benefit	44	46
				One adult employed earning National Living Wage	31	35
One parent & 2 children (pre-school & primary school)	99	103	+4.4	State benefit	32	33
				One adult employed earning National Living Wage	28	28
Pensioner (female, living alone)	57	60	+4.6	State pension	34	33

- Minimum food costs are highest for a household with an adolescent, secondary school age, costing approximately one third more than for a household with younger children.

- School meals and milk makeup a notable share of minimum food costs (13%) for a 2 parent household with a primary and secondary school age child.
- For households with children, an average of two-thirds of the minimum food costs are on meat, fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and bread and cereals. Each of these areas increased in price between 2016 and 2018.
- The minimum food costs for a female pensioner living alone showed the greatest increase since 2016 of 4.6%. As the social inclusion aspects of the food basket, which are crucial for this household type, increased in price at a higher rate than other aspects of the minimum food basket.
- The proportion of take-home income required for the MESL food basket ranged from 26-46%. Working-age households reliant solely on state benefits required a higher proportion of income.
- The benefits 'freeze' and rising food prices, results in households with children reliant on state benefits needing to spend an increased share of take-home income to meet minimum food costs in 2018, in comparison to 2016.
- For households in 'National Living Wage' employment, and receiving Universal Credit, changes to net household take-home income have not kept pace with increasing food costs, and consequently the share of net household take-home income required to meet minimum food costs has increased in 2018.

1 Introduction

Food poverty is defined as ‘the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability and access to food, with related impacts on health, culture and social participation being felt’. Food poverty therefore not only affects what people eat, it also impacts on peoples’ lifestyles, social interactions and health. It is a core experience of poverty. Data published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency show that 18% of the population were in relative poverty in 2016/17 and 15% in absolute poverty (before housing costs)(3).

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research applies the ‘Consensual Budget Standards methodology’. This method involves working with members of the public to reach agreement on the minimum needed to live and partake in the social and economic norms of everyday life. Through engaging with multiple deliberative focus groups, iterative in-depth discussions with members of the public produce a negotiated consensus on what people regard as essential for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living.

The research identifies what is needed to meet physical, psychological and social needs at a minimum but acceptable level. It is not a poverty standard, and represents a minimum level which people have agreed nobody should be expected to live below.

This report presents the cost of the minimum essential food basket for the 4 household types, adjusted to reflect food costs in 2018. The baskets, first established for 2014(1) and 2016(2), are adjusted to 2018 prices using the appropriate Consumer Price Index (CPI (COICOP four-digit level)) classification, as published by the Office for National Statistics.

2 Objectives

1. To determine the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Healthy Food Basket for 2018 for in Northern Ireland for the following 4 household types:
 - Two-parents, 2 children (pre-school and primary school age)
 - Two-parents, 2 children (primary and secondary school age)
 - One-parent, 2 children (pre-school and primary school age)
 - Pensioner female living alone

2. To present the cost of the minimum essential food basket as a percentage of household take-home income for low income scenarios
 - Household in receipt of social welfare payments
 - One adult employed and earning the National Living Wage (NLW).
 - In receipt of a state pension in the case of the pensioner

3. To provide a breakdown of the cost of the food basket by sub-category.

4. To analyse the cost of food for children by age.

3 Methodology

The cost of a minimum essential food basket and the cost of the minimum essential standard of living for each household type was updated stepwise i.e. updating for 2017 and then for 2018 by using the methodology described previously^(1, 2). A brief overview is given below.

Cost of a minimum essential food basket

The cost of the food basket for each of the 4 household types was adjusted using UK Consumer Price Index (CPI) data, applying the appropriate detailed sub rate (COICOP four-digit level classification) to each sub-category, uprating food costs for the 24 months to March 2018².

Cost of a minimum essential food basket by sub-category

The cost of the food basket is broken down by sub-category for each household. Fourteen of the categories correspond to COICOP classifications including categories for fast-food & take-away and for café & restaurant i.e. 'eating out'. Treats, extra for visitors, and extra for Christmas, are adjusted using the overall food CPI rate. The school lunch and milk price were directly priced.

Cost of the minimum essential food basket as a proportion of household take-home income

The income scenarios presented for the households are hypothetical and are an example of the average net household income, "take-home income", for the scenarios considered. The online calculator, www.entitledto.co.uk, was used to help generate the income scenarios. Income calculations are based on the rates for the financial year 01/04/2018 to 31/04/2019 rates for the National Living Wage, personal taxation and State Benefits.

In the case the state benefits scenario it is assumed that each household has full entitlement to the relevant state benefit payments (Table 2).

² ONS (2018) Consumer price inflation tables (online dataset). Accessed 7th December 2018. www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/datasets/consumerpriceinflation/current

Table 2 State benefit payments for household scenarios

Households with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobseeker’s Allowance, Child Tax Credit, Child Benefit, Housing Benefit (rates), Housing Benefit • It is assumed the household is living in social housing. Housing Benefit is based on the average weekly rent charged by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (£66.60 per week). • Assumed no savings, assets, or other incomes, which will result in a reduced rate of means-tested payments.
Pensioner, Living Alone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic State Pension, Pension Credit, Winter Fuel Payment, Housing Benefit (rates) • Assumed no savings, assets, or incomes, which will result in reduced rate of payment. • Assume individual is of pension age, but under 80, and living alone. • Assume the person owns their own home, is entitled to full basic pension rate, pension credit and domestic rates benefit.

The employment scenario is based on earning the National Living Wage rate, £7.83 (the statutory minimum wage payable to adults 25 and over (not to be confused with the voluntary ‘Living Wage’ for the UK). The 2 parent household scenario is based on 1 adult in full-time (37.5 hours) employment while the 1 parent household is based on the adult working in part-time (16 hours) employment. It is assumed the household in this scenario is living in social housing and that income is net-household income, after Income Tax and National Insurance, and Universal Credit and Child Benefit.

The details of the calculations for each household type and each income scenario are represented in Appendix 1.

Cost of food for a child

In order to determine the food costs for a child, part of the cost of the household food basket is allocated to each individual in the household. This proportion is calculated on the basis of the Nelson food scale(4), which is itself based on research establishing the distribution of food intake across family members. This cost is presented both in monetary terms and as a percentage of the cost of the minimum essential standard of living core items.

4 Results

The cost of the Minimum Essential Food Basket for the 4 household types in Northern Ireland in 2018 is presented in Table 1.

- Between 2016 and 2018 the cost of food increased by an average of 4.2%³. Despite this 2-year increase, average food prices remain 2.1% lower in 2018 than in 2014.
- The average rate of change⁴ is based on the CPI sub-rate for 'Food, which reflects the change in the cost of the average food basket purchased across the UK'. This showed a 12-month increase of 1.6% in 2017 and 3.0% in 2018.
- The cost of the minimum food basket has changed at a different rate than the average CPI for food, increasing by more than 4.2% for three of the 4 household types examined.
- The differential in cost for a 1-parent and 2-parent household with a pre-school and primary school age child is modest. This demonstrates the economy of scale available in the minimum food basket for a 2 adult household.
- Minimum food costs for a 2-parent household with a primary and secondary school age child are the most expensive, of the 4 household types. The cost is one-third higher for this household type than a 2-parent household with a pre-school and primary school child.
- The female pensioner living alone is the smallest household composition examined and has the lowest minimum food cost. However, this household type's food basket demonstrated the greatest rate of price increase, 4.6%, in the 2-year period.

Food as a proportion of household take-home income

The cost of a minimum essential food basket represents a greater proportion of household take-home income in 2018 than in 2016 (due to the increase in average food prices over the 2-year period outpacing changes in household income) for the working-age households examined (Table 1).

- The cost of the minimum food basket represents a significant proportion of household take-home income. However, the same minimum food cost represents a smaller proportion of

³ This is the cumulative rate for the UK CPI rate for **Food** for the 24 months to March 2018

⁴ The average rate of change is based on the CPI sub-rate for 'Food', which reflects the change in the cost of the average food basket purchased across the UK

household take-home income for households in employment (due to higher household income) than for households dependent on state benefits.

- The proportion of household take-home income required for an MESL food basket increased over the 2-year period between 2016 and 2018, for all working-age household types.

Households dependent on state benefits

- For working-age state benefit dependent households, meeting the cost of the minimum food basket required 33–46% of household take-home income in 2018.
- The benefits ‘freeze’ and rising food prices has resulted in households with children reliant on state benefits needing to spend an increased share of take-home income to meet minimum food costs in 2018, in comparison to 2016.
- When dependent on state benefits, minimum food costs represent one third of household take-home income for both the 1-parent and 2 -parent household types with younger children, pre-school and primary school age.
- Food costs for the 2-parent household composition with an older child, demand the highest proportion of household take-home income. Meeting the cost of a minimum essential food basket requires almost half (46%) of this household’s take-home income (state benefits).
- A pensioner living alone would need to spend a third (33.1%) of household take-home income to meet the cost of the minimum essential food basket. The change in the proportion of take-home income required for this household type (from 2016 to 2018) is minimal at -0.6 percentage points (in 2016 food costs amounted to 33.7% of income).

Households in employment

- For working-age employed households, the minimum food basket represents a lower range of take home household income: 26 – 35%.
- The combined effect of an increase in the cost of the food basket, and changes in net household take-home income for those dependent on the National Living Wage (and receiving Universal Credit) resulted in an increase in the proportion of income required to meet minimum food costs.
- Both household types with younger children, pre-school and primary school age, would need to spend approximately one quarter of household take-home income to afford the minimum essential food basket in 2018. This is an increase of 1 to 2 percentage points from 2016, as changes in net household income have been lower than changing food costs.

- The household with an older child (two parents with a primary and secondary school age child) would need to spend over a one third of household take-home income to afford the minimum essential food basket. This is an increase of 4 percentage points from 2016.
- For each of the three household types, the income in the employed scenario is higher than when reliant on state benefits only, consequently the cost of the minimum food basket represents a smaller proportion of net household income.

Minimum essential food costs by sub-category

To provide further insight into the composition of the minimum essential food basket, and the factors influencing changes in minimum food costs, a breakdown of the basket by sub-category is examined, and the different rate of price changes is examined by sub-category (Table 3). Appendix 2 provides trend dates on costs of food subcategories from 2014-2018

Proportional composition of the basket

- Meat takes the largest proportion of the minimum food costs, accounting for a quarter of costs for households with children and a fifth for the female pensioner living alone.
- For households with children, an average of two thirds of the minimum food costs are on meat, fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and bread and cereals.
- Dairy products and ‘milk, cheese and eggs’ account for a larger proportion of the food budget for households with younger children than the household with an older child or the pensioner household.
- While meat represents the largest proportion of costs, fish accounts for only 3–4% of the minimum essential food basket, reflecting the preferences agreed upon in the focus group deliberations.
- School meals and milk account for a notable proportion of costs (13%) for the 2-parent household type with a primary and second level age child⁵.

Social and cultural dimensions of food

- Food poverty is multi-dimensional, it encompasses both the lack of access to a nutritionally adequate diet, and the consequential impact on health and social participation. The minimum essential food basket includes allocations, which reflect the social cultural aspects

⁵ This figure includes the cost of school milk and three school lunches per school-week. However, in this scenario, this household may be entitled to free school meals, and this would reduce the cost of their food basket.

of food, ensuring that households can participate in activities and practices considered a normal part of everyday life.

- Take-away food is included in the minimum food budget, with an allowance for one take-away a month. This makes up a small proportion of the cost, an average of 4% for households with children.
- Similarly, there is a modest provision made for alcohol (wine or beer), accounting for 6–7% of the minimum essential food budget

Table 3: Minimum essential food basket by sub-category

	2 parent & 2 children			2 parent & 2 children			1 parent & 2 children			Pensioner, female			
	Pre-school & primary school		Primary & secondary school	Pre-school & primary school		Pre-school & primary school	Pre-school & primary school		Living alone	Pre-school & primary school		Living alone	
	Cost p/w £	% of food MESL	Cost p/w £	% of food MESL	Cost p/w £	% of food MESL	Cost p/w £	% of food MESL	Cost p/w £	Cost p/w £	% of food MESL	Cost p/w £	% of food MESL
Bread and cereals	12.97	11	16.22	10	11.58	11	2.38	4					
Meat	29.60	25	41.34	26	24.73	24	11.33	19					
Fish	4.10	3	4.58	3	2.68	3	2.33	4					
Milk, cheese and eggs	13.22	11	10.12	6	9.57	9	3.67	6					
Oils and fats	1.73	1	3.84	2	2.73	3	0.55	1					
Fruit	13.93	12	13.54	8	9.98	10	3.13	5					
Vegetables including potatoes and tubers	13.36	11	17.51	11	12.02	12	9.08	15					
Sugar, jam and syrups	0.47	0	0.92	1	1.17	1	0.00	0					
Food products nec	1.21	1	3.17	2	3.46	3	1.85	3					
Coffee, tea and cocoa	2.04	2	4.04	3	1.61	2	1.13	2					
Mineral waters, soft drinks and juices	2.25	2	2.68	2	1.36	1	0.00	0					
Alcoholic beverages	8.46	7	10.28	6	6.17	6	3.98	7					
Take-away	5.44	5	6.64	4	3.99	4	3.26	5					
Treats	3.95	3	3.14	2	3.24	3	2.49	4					
School lunch and milk	6.26	5	19.99	13	8.04	8	0.00	0					
Extra for visitors	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	10.06	17					
Extra for Christmas	1.16	1	1.41	1	£.01	1	0.48	1					
Eating out	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	4.05	7					
TOTAL	120.17	100	159.44	100	103.33	100	59.76	100					

- For the pensioner living alone, the social inclusion aspects of food comprise a larger proportion of the budget, as it was agreed that a person living alone should be able to host visitors and meet people for a meal out occasionally. Consequently, the pensioner budget includes both an allocation for having a meal out once a month, and a weekly budget of £10 for visitors. These comprise 23.6% of the minimum food costs.
- The inclusion of alcohol, treats, a takeaway once a month, and providing for visitors highlights the social and cultural aspects of food. These items ensure that the minimum essential food basket is based on real-life experience and that while food is, of course, necessary for survival, there is also a social and cultural dimension to it as well.

Changing cost

- The UK average change in food costs was 4.2%. Within this average change, some categories of food have increased in cost while others have declined.
- The average cost of 'oils and fats' and 'fish' both increased significantly (25.9%, 13.2%, respectively), but had a negligible impact on the final cost as they comprise a minor proportion of the basket.
- Increases in the average cost of meat (3.2%), vegetables (2.7%), fruit (4.7%) and 'milk, cheese and eggs' (5.5%), all contributed to the increase in the cost of the minimum essential food basket.
- Increases in the average cost of take-away food (6.3%) and restaurants & cafes (5.7%), contributed to the pensioner living alone household type having the largest proportional increase in cost over the 2 years.

5 References

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3. Department for Communities. % population living in absolute and relative poverty (before housing costs). 2018.
4. Collins ML, MacMahon B, Weld G, Thornton R. A minimum standard of income for Ireland; a consensual budget standards study examining household types across the lifecycle. Dublin: The Policy Institute at Trinity College Dublin; 2012.

6 Appendices

Appendix 1: Calculations for each household type and each income scenario

Table 4: Household income calculations for working-age families with children

	2 parent, pre-school & primary (£)	2 parent primary & secondary (£)	1 parent pre-school & primary (£)
State benefits			
Child tax credit	117.50	117.50	117.50
Jobseeker's allowance	114.85	114.85	73.10
Child benefit	34.40	34.40	34.40
Housing benefit (rates)	16.85	16.85	16.85
Housing benefit	66.60	66.60	66.60
Household income	350.20	350.20	308.45
National Living Wage			
Gross salary	293.63	293.63	125.28
Income tax	-13.15	-13.15	0.00
National insurance	-15.80	-15.80	0.00
Net earnings	264.68	264.68	125.28
Universal credit - adult	115.13	115.13	73.34
Universal credit - child	117.40	117.40	117.40
Universal credit - housing	66.60	66.60	66.60
Earnings reduction	-137.96	-137.96	-50.14
Universal credit	161.17	161.17	207.21
Child benefit	34.40	34.40	34.40
Rate relief	0.00	0.00	1.82
Household income	460.25	460.25	368.71

Table 5: Household income calculations for pension-age household type

	Pensioner living alone
State pension	
Basic state pension	125.95
Pension credit	37.05
Winter fuel payment	3.84
Housing benefit (rates)	13.48
Household income	180.32

Appendix 2: Change in cost of food by sub-category

Table 6: Change in cost by food sub-category from 2014- 2018 for a 2 parent & 2 child (pre-school & primary school) household

Food sub-category	2014 (£)	2015 (£)	2016 (£)	2017 (£)	2018 (£)
Bread and cereals	12.85	12.80	12.55	12.72	12.97
Meat	30.18	30.01	28.69	28.69	29.60
Fish	3.95	3.83	3.63	3.95	4.10
Milk, cheese and eggs	13.47	13.08	12.53	12.64	13.22
Oils and fats	1.54	1.48	1.37	1.59	1.73
Fruit	13.43	13.05	13.30	13.47	13.93
Vegetables	13.52	13.57	13.01	13.24	13.36
Sugar, jam and syrups	0.46	0.46	0.45	0.46	0.47
Food products not elsewhere classified	1.19	1.18	1.18	1.20	1.21
Coffee, tea and cocoa	1.89	1.88	1.89	1.95	2.04
Mineral waters, soft drinks, etc.	2.27	2.29	2.26	2.17	2.25
Alcoholic beverages	8.49	8.56	8.23	8.40	8.46
Take-away	5.00	5.02	5.11	5.26	5.44
Treats	3.93	3.89	3.78	3.84	3.95
School lunch and milk	5.83	5.83	6.05	6.05	6.26
Extra for Christmas	1.15	1.14	1.11	1.13	1.16
TOTAL	119.17	118.09	115.14	116.75	120.17

Table 7: Change in cost by food sub- category from 2016- 2018 for a 2-parent & 2-child (primary & secondary school) household

	2016 (£)	2017 (£)	2018 (£)
Bread and cereals	15.69	15.91	16.22
Meat	40.06	40.06	41.34
Fish	4.05	4.40	4.58
Milk, cheese and eggs	9.59	9.68	10.12
Oils and fats	3.05	3.52	3.84
Fruit	12.93	13.10	13.54
Vegetables	17.05	17.35	17.51
Sugar, jam and syrups	0.89	0.89	0.92
Food products not elsewhere classified	3.09	3.14	3.17
Coffee, tea and cocoa	3.75	3.88	4.04
Mineral waters, soft drinks, etc.	2.70	2.58	2.68
Alcoholic Beverages	10.00	10.20	10.28
Take-away	6.25	6.43	6.64
Treats	3.00	3.05	3.14
School lunch and milk	19.57	19.57	19.99
Extra for Christmas	1.35	1.37	1.41
TOTAL	153.00	155.14	159.44

Table 8: Change in cost by food sub- category from 2016- 2018 for a 1-parent & 2-child (pre-school & primary school) household

	2016 (£)	2017 (£)	2018 (£)
Bread and cereals	11.21	11.36	11.58
Meat	23.96	23.96	24.73
Fish	2.37	2.58	2.68
Milk, cheese and eggs	9.06	9.15	9.57
Oils and fats	2.17	2.51	2.73
Fruit	9.53	9.65	9.98
Vegetables	11.71	11.92	12.02
Sugar, jam and syrups	1.12	1.13	1.17
Food products not elsewhere classified	3.37	3.43	3.46
Coffee, tea and cocoa	1.49	1.54	1.61
Mineral waters, soft drinks, etc.	1.37	1.31	1.36
Alcoholic beverages	6.00	6.12	6.17
Take-away	3.75	3.86	3.99
Treats	3.09	3.14	3.24
School lunch and milk	7.83	7.83	8.04
Extra for Christmas	0.96	0.98	1.01
TOTAL	99.00	100.46	103.33

Table 9: Change in cost by food sub-category from 2014- 2018 for a female pensioner, living alone

	2014 (£)	2015 (£)	2016 (£)	2017 (£)	2018 (£)
Bread and cereals	2.35	2.35	2.30	2.33	2.38
Meat	11.55	11.48	10.98	10.98	11.33
Fish	2.24	2.17	2.06	2.24	2.33
Milk, cheese and eggs	3.74	3.63	3.48	3.51	3.67
Oils and fats	0.49	0.47	0.44	0.51	0.55
Fruit	3.02	2.94	2.99	3.03	3.13
Vegetables	9.18	9.21	8.84	8.99	9.08
Sugar, jam and syrups	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Food products not elsewhere classified	1.82	1.80	1.80	1.83	1.85
Coffee, tea and cocoa	1.05	1.04	1.05	1.08	1.13
Mineral waters, soft drinks, etc.	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Alcoholic beverages	3.99	4.02	3.87	3.95	3.98
Take-away	3.00	3.01	3.07	3.16	3.26
Treats	2.47	2.45	2.38	2.41	2.49
Extra for visitors	10.00	9.91	9.61	9.77	10.06
Extra for Christmas	0.48	0.48	0.46	0.47	0.48
Eating out	3.75	3.76	3.84	3.94	4.05
TOTAL	59.13	58.73	57.14	58.19	59.76

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