

Food for thought: School holiday meal provision

We spoke to Lindsay Graham, child food poverty policy advisor, about the steps being made to provide food to children from low income families during the school holidays

Summer 2018 is approaching fast. You may already be planning your holiday destination. Let's hope you get good weather for your break. I would ask you to just think for a moment about our low income families here in the U.K. For them, holidays are a major financial stress point in the year. School summer holiday periods across the UK vary in duration between 6 to 8 weeks and that's a long time to find extra budget for food, fuel, clothing, childcare and activities for school age children. In fact, all school holiday breaks can be a tough time for our young people when they don't access their daily, hot, free school meal.

This issue which is commonly termed as 'Holiday Hunger' is a historical policy gap area. It affects all four UK regions and, according to early research, we know that for children reliant on free school meals holidays are a time of uncertainty, hunger and social isolation. In 2015, APSE did the first ever UK survey into the issue with its membership. At the time, 71% of respondents said that holiday hunger was an issue for their council.

Fast forward two years to 2017 and a snapshot mapping by Northumbria University identified some 593 projects around the UK involved in some sort of holiday provision. 111 of those projects were local authority led; with the majority of projects starting in

2016/17 and focusing mainly on primary school aged children. Only 38 of the clubs responding did not offer food. Food provision had previously been researched as the main priority for those running the clubs. Play, child care, social activities and enrichment opportunities for child and families were also identified as service needs within the clubs.

The awareness of hungry UK children and the underlying causes of it have become much more apparent in the last 5 years. Zero hour contracts, benefit sanctions, homelessness, ill health and unemployment are all causal factors in families struggling to decide which bill they will pay before they decide what food to buy. Holiday hunger is a symptom of child poverty and while many programmes have sprung up in response to manage the local crisis points, it is the upstream measures that are needed in policy that will truly make a difference to the next generation, such as better paid jobs, smoother welfare access, decent housing and early intervention pathways to services. All of which require investment and longer term planning.

Children don't stop being hungry while the upstream measures are being slugged out. That is why it was pleasing to see the School Holidays (Meals and Activities) Bill brought forward by Frank Field MP getting its second reading in January this year. Though still to be debated further, the parliamentary Bill, supported by 133 MPs, brought about a Department of Education announcement of pilots and research starting this summer and running over summer 2019. More details on this will be released soon.

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Also, there are now 8 universities in the UK conducting research into aspects of holiday meal and activity provision. The Welsh Assembly is investing £1.5million in its Food and Fun programme led by local authorities and school meal services in partnership with sports, health and education agencies. The housing sector has championed some amazing holiday projects that provide respite and support for some of our communities most vulnerable families. The community groups also continue to work tirelessly on shoestring budgets providing food and care throughout the school holidays.



Elsewhere in the UK, the Scottish Government announced an extra £1 million addition to its Fair Food Fund over the next two years that would have a focus on new activity to support children facing food insecurity, particularly during school holidays. Details of how the fund will work have yet to be released. In North Lanarkshire, councils have approved plans to provide free meals for children in low income households every day of the year.

Meanwhile in England, The DfE are set to announce £2 million for 'Holiday Activities and Food Provision' – there is no minimum or upper limit but grants will not be awarded under £250k. The grants which would come from the DfE 'Holiday Activities and Food Research fund' are looking for established projects with a track record of delivery. There will be a new fund announced for Easter and Summer 2019.

Holiday provision programmes that include food take time, effort and

planning. It is essential that policies, venues, partnerships, staff training, marketing and resources are all in place before projects begin. Some forward thinking, training and planning can save resources in the long run.

Having visited projects in the UK and USA I see families whose lives are transformed by the simple provision of a decent meal, a warm welcome, a signpost to support and a chance to connect with a community in a safe environment. That often is all that is needed to help turn a corner in life's daily trudge.

It is the research into this issue that fills me and others with optimism. We are seeing families, less isolated, food secure, engaged, learning new skills and most importantly positive impacts on learning loss for children attending projects. We will never fully eradicate child poverty or hunger but we can halt the rise of both issues by changing the way we work

in our communities. Holiday provision projects offer a window of opportunity to engage with our communities and promote public services in a new light. John F Kennedy said 'Children are the living messages that we send to a time we will not see'. That's something worth remembering.

• In conjunction with Lindsay, APSE will be running the "Kitchen Social - Awareness Sessions for Local Authorities" training course focusing on the issue of holiday hunger. Upcoming dates include:

- 21 May 2018 Oxford
- 25 May 2018 Bristol
- 29 May 2018 Manchester

For details about the course, please visit the training hub on the APSE website, or alternatively contact Jan Kennedy on Jkennedy@apse.org.uk

2018 Dates for your diary

16 -18 May

APSE Scotland Fleet, Waste and Grounds Seminar 2018, Aviemore

8 June

APSE Solutions Market Engagement Event: Underground Refuse Systems

14 June

APSE Transport Seminar 2018, Coventry

12 - 13 September

APSE Annual Seminar 2018, Edinburgh

For more information, visit our website at www.apse.org.uk or call 0161 772 1810