

Kids on the breadline: Solutions to holiday hunger

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Bevan Foundation, 145a High Street, Merthyr Tydfil CF47 8DP
info@bevanfoundation.org www.bevanfoundation.org

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KIDS ON THE BREADLINE: SOLUTIONS TO HOLIDAY HUNGER

Contents

SUMMARY	3
1. HOLIDAY HUNGER IN WALES	4
2. CAUSES OF HOLIDAY HUNGER	5
2.1 Lack of free school meals	5
2.2 Childcare costs	6
2.3 Reduced income.....	6
3. CURRENT HOLIDAY PROVISION.....	7
3.1 Food Aid	7
3.2 Holiday schemes	8
3.3 Low cost food schemes	8
4. EMERGING ISSUES.....	10
4.1 Understanding the problem.....	10
4.2 Reach and inclusion	10
4.3 Criteria for eligibility	10
4.4 Standards	11
4.5 Reducing stigma	11
4.6 Planning and co-ordination.....	11
4.7 Building capacity	11
5. SOLUTIONS	12
5.1 Enhancing holiday provision	12
5.2 Making it happen	14
5.3 Boosting family incomes	14
6. CONCLUSION	17
REFERENCES	18

SUMMARY

Holiday hunger is a growing problem in Wales, and is part of the wider challenge of children's food insecurity.¹ Every school holiday, thousands of children and their families either skip meals entirely or eat low quality, unhealthy food mostly due to a lack of money. This can have a devastating impact on children's lives, affecting their health, education and overall wellbeing. It is a national scandal.

The causes of holiday hunger are intrinsically linked to the causes of poverty. The pressures faced by low-income families year-round are exacerbated during school holidays by:

- loss of free school meals
- extra costs such as childcare
- reduced income as a result of cuts to working hours or changes in benefits

A growing number of families receive help to deal with these pressures from a variety of organisations across Wales. Yet for every child who participates in a holiday scheme, at least ten more go without.

The Bevan Foundation decided to find solutions to the holiday hunger following reports of the scale of the problem in the area in which we are based – Merthyr Tydfil.² We were not alone in deciding it is time for action: the Children's Commissioner for Wales, South Wales Food Poverty Alliance and Children's Future Food Inquiry all identified the need to address the problem of food insecurity especially in school holidays.

We have reviewed other research studies, listened to experts and engaged with people working on the front line of provision. We would have liked to listen to children and their parents with experience of holiday hunger, but regrettably did not have the resources to do so. The findings of those who have done so goes some way to filling this gap.

We have identified six essential steps that the Welsh Government, local authorities and other public bodies should take including:

1. increasing investment in a range of types of holiday schemes to at least £4.75 million a year, enabling approximately 16,000 children to benefit
2. setting high standards for nutrition, scheme activities, safeguarding and parent / carer involvement for all schemes, based on the School Holiday Enrichment Programme
3. enacting legislation so that local authorities can co-ordinate sufficient holiday provision
4. providing access to emergency financial support to families in school holidays via the Discretionary Assistance Fund
5. helping families with budgeting during the holidays, by allowing flexible payments of essentials e.g. rents
6. in the long term, boosting family incomes with a holiday income supplement.

Taken together, these measures would mean that no child goes without a decent diet in the summer holidays because their family does not have enough money.

1. HOLIDAY HUNGER IN WALES

“Holiday hunger” occurs when families, usually on low incomes, are unable to provide their child with an adequate diet during the school holidays because they cannot afford to do so. The term not only means parents or children skipping meals altogether due to a lack of food, it also includes children having a low-quality diet, such as living off breakfast cereal, sandwiches or crisps, because it is all their family can afford.

It is difficult to measure the full extent to which children struggle to have an adequate diet in the school holidays. What evidence does exist suggests that an inadequate diet during the long summer break is a significant problem in Wales. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales’ research on poverty reported that parents and children found getting decent food was particularly difficult in the school holidays.³ In March 2018, the Food Standards Agency published a report which highlighted that as many as one in five Welsh families had worried about running out of food in the previous twelve months, with figure being higher amongst families with children.⁴ Over the same period, 14 per cent of people reported that they had run out of food before they could afford to buy more.⁵ In 2018-19, 113,373 three-day emergency food parcels were given by Trussell Trust foodbanks to families in Wales, with more than a third of emergency provision - 40,793 parcels - going to children.⁶ Many organisations, such as charities, housing associations, and community groups, have encountered children without enough to eat in the holidays and have provided additional support to them. There are also likely to be many other families experiencing food insecurity which do not draw on any support.⁷

Evidence also suggests that the challenges faced by families are more pronounced during school holidays. The use of foodbanks, for example, spikes during school holidays, in particular over the summer.⁸ Research undertaken by Food Cardiff found that as many as 35 per cent of children who accessed the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) reported that they skip a meal on days that they do not attend.⁹ Research also suggests that some parents skip a meal or eat leftovers to ensure that their children are fed.¹⁰

An inadequate diet can have a long term implications for children. There is a wealth of evidence that highlights a link between poverty and food insecurity on the one hand, and a range of issues such as obesity and low educational attainment on the other. Children from Wales’ most deprived areas for example, are more likely to be obese than children from more affluent backgrounds.¹¹ A 2017 report by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health found that an overwhelming number of paediatricians in the UK felt there was a link between parents being unable afford to buy nutritious food on the one hand, and ill-health among the children that they treat on the other.¹² Many children from low-income families may not be eating the type of nutritious food they need to continue their development.¹³

A poor-quality diet also has implications for a child’s educational development. Children who have a poor or inadequate diet over the holidays suffer greater “learning loss” than children who don’t face the same challenges.¹⁴ Holiday hunger, along with other negative experiences over the school holidays such as isolation, can also have an impact on a child’s mental health.¹⁵ This continues well into the school term with some school governors suggesting that it can take up to five weeks for children to be physically and mentally ready to re-engage with school.¹⁶

2. CAUSES OF HOLIDAY HUNGER

The causes of food insecurity and holiday hunger in Wales are intrinsically linked to the causes of poverty more generally. Low household income, be that income earned through work or support provided by the social security system, combined with high costs and in particular high housing costs, mean that 180,000 children in Wales live in relative income poverty.¹⁷

Having a low income makes it difficult for families to afford an adequate diet. The difficulties are exacerbated by the 'poverty premium', in which families on low incomes often pay more for products and services, including food, than families with higher incomes. Families may not be able to afford the transport costs to travel to larger, out of town supermarkets where food is often cheaper than in local convenience stores.¹⁸ Low-income households may also not be able to afford to bulk-buy food or have adequate storage space to keep larger quantities of food. Given that large packs of food are often cheaper per gram or per litre than smaller packages, low-income families pay more for the same food than a higher-income family.¹⁹

Anticipated increases in the price of food are likely to put further pressure on the resources of low-income households. Brexit is forecast to increase food prices by 3.9 per cent²⁰ while climate change is expected to add £7.15 per month to a household's food bill.²¹

The pressures faced by low income families exist year-round, but are exacerbated during school holiday by:

- loss of free school meals
- extra costs such as childcare
- reduced income as a result of cuts to working hours or changes in benefits.

2.1 Lack of free school meals

Free school meals provide some low-income families with vital support during term time. For children who are eligible and who claim, a free meal is estimated to save a family £334 per year, or £8.79 per week during term time.²² Not only do free school meals reduce household costs, they also ensure that children have at least one nutritious meal a day.

During school holidays, families need to provide an equivalent meal themselves. Some have estimated that the cost of doing so is significantly higher than the cost of a free school meal, with families having to spend as much as an extra £30 to £40 a week on food over the school holidays.²³

However free school meals are far from perfect, with not all children who are entitled to a free meal taking one up. In addition, many children in low income families are not entitled to a free school meal, e.g. because their family includes someone who is in work and who earns more than the income threshold.²⁴ Even when a child receives a free meal, the sum available may not be enough to purchase a complete meal.²⁵ It is estimated that across the UK only around a third of children who experience 'holiday hunger' are actually eligible for a free school meal.²⁶

Whilst the loss of free school meals is clearly an important factor that has an impact on low income families over the school holidays, it is not the only cause.

2.2 Childcare costs

Childcare costs have a major impact on families over the school holidays. More than two thirds of children who live in poverty live in households where at least one adult is in work.²⁷ In 2018, childcare in the school holidays cost a family an average of £124.85 a week.²⁸ For working families this additional cost can place a significant strain on their resources.

2.3 Reduced income

Some parents reduce their working hours over the school holidays or have a term-time only work contracts, to save on childcare costs and to spend time with their children. A survey of 223 parents in Glasgow found that 14 per cent had reduced the number of hours they worked over the holidays, with a further 37 per cent seeking changes to their working hours.²⁹

It is not just earned income that is affected over the holiday period. Some parents may find it difficult to comply with all of the conditions placed upon them to receive social security benefits, for example being able to search and apply for jobs, and so may face benefit sanctions. Changes of circumstance e.g. a contract ending may also trigger a fresh benefit claim, which brings an in-built delay of at least five weeks before Universal Credit is paid. As Universal Credit is rolled out across Wales, many more families could experience changes to their benefit income precisely when they face greatest pressure.

3. CURRENT HOLIDAY PROVISION

A number of organisations across Wales have taken action over recent years to address the problem of an inadequate diet in school holidays. We do not include here one-off events that involve the provision of food, such as community picnics, but are focused on schemes whose objectives explicitly include providing food for children for a substantial part of the holiday period.

The type of provision on offer varies widely, with different target groups of participants, different formats and a variety of settings. We have identified three broad types of provision.

3.1 Food Aid

Food aid schemes provide families with free food to prepare and cook in their own homes. They may involve emergency or planned provision, but most require some form of 'proof' of need.

Perhaps the most well-known type of aid is the foodbank. Foodbanks provide emergency food for people at time of crisis. There are dozens of foodbanks in Wales being run by a range of organisations, from small local charities to the Trussell Trust who run more than 30 foodbanks across the nation. How families claim support varies depending on who runs the foodbank. Trussell Trust foodbanks require families to be referred by a professional such as a GP or social worker, while others provide food on request. Foodbanks play a vital role in the school holidays with many reporting increased demand from children and families during this period.

Other types of food aid provide groceries to specific groups of people. For example eligible tenants of Merthyr Valleys Homes are able to contact the housing association, requesting support. The housing association then provides that family with a food hamper containing a selection of staples and treats. An example of the support provided by Merthyr Valleys Homes can be seen below.

Figure 1 Merthyr Valleys Homes Holiday Hamper Scheme³⁰

Holiday Hampers – Implementation

Summer 2018:

93 Households initially registered - 58 Tenants received packs.

The total cost for the project was £2,383.29 plus staff time.

Breakdown of expenditure:

Food - £2249.01

Carrier Bags - £36.28

Van Hire - £78.00

This equates to £7.94 per week per household or £39.72 per household for the duration of the summer holidays.

Each weekly hamper included 1 x cereal, 2 x beans, 2 x hotdogs, 3 x cereal bars, 3 x sweets, 2 x long life milk, 1 x sandwich spread, 1 x pasta, 1 x jam, 2 x soup, 1 x pasta sauce.

All content was non-perishable to avoid wastage in the event of drop out or inability to contact the tenant. At the end of the summer holidays, any undistributed packages will be donated to the local Food Banks or given to any late registrations (approx. 10-15 bags).

3.2 Holiday schemes

Holiday schemes take a different approach. They typically provide a meal and activities for children at a community venue, rather than offering food to prepare at home. There are several different formats that holiday schemes can take, with variation in the settings used (schools, sports centres or community facilities), in the activities on offer (sport, outings or games), ethos (e.g. the emphasis on nutritional standards and skills) and provider (community or faith groups, local authority or UK charities).

The Welsh Government's School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) is perhaps the best-known scheme. SHEP is a quality-assured scheme that includes breakfast, lunch, physical activity, food and nutrition skills education and enrichment activities. It was piloted in Cardiff in 2015 and is currently in its third year of a three-year roll out across Wales, part funded by Welsh Government and overseen by the Welsh Local Government Association. All SHEP schemes work in partnership with their local authorities, health boards and sport development agencies and many other partner organisations.

Funding for SHEP schemes is only available for schools where 16 per cent or more of pupils aged between 5 and 15 are eligible for free school meals.³¹ In 2018, approximately 2,500 places were made available for children under the SHEP programme, with 56 schemes in operation across 16 local authorities and all 7 local health boards.³² The SHEP programme also provides support to families by providing at least one family breakfast or lunch per week.³³ Many schemes also provide parents with an opportunity to attend courses to gain new skills that could help them to find employment, or simply to improve their cooking skills.

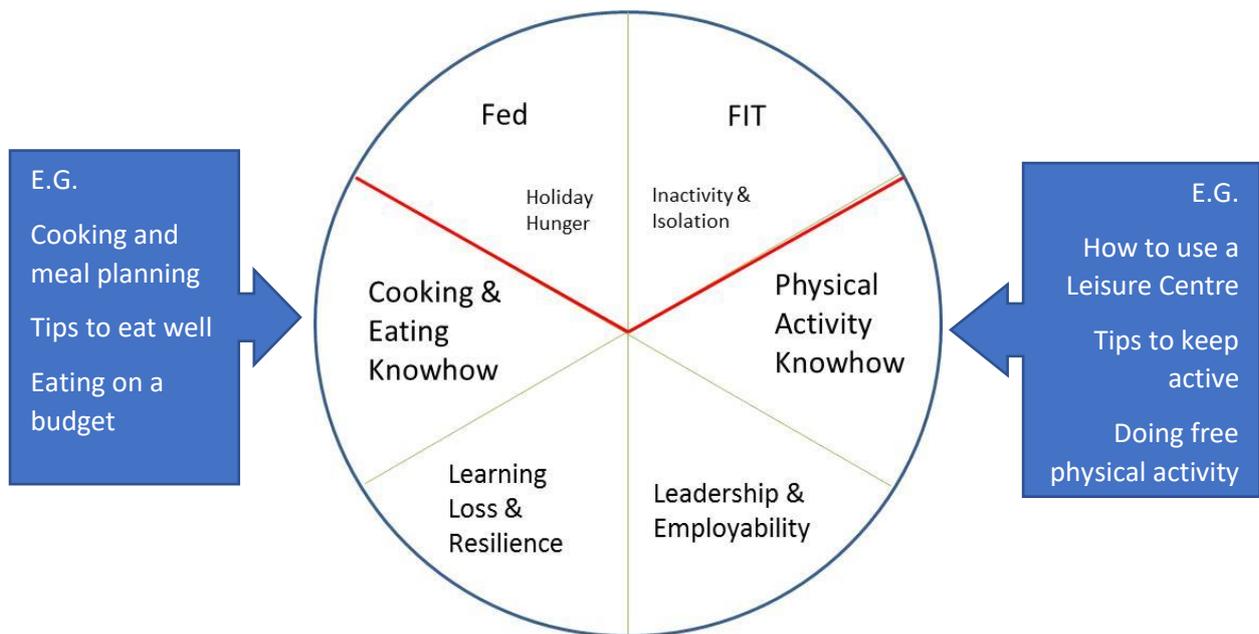
SHEP is not the only form of holiday provision - several community and faith groups run holiday schemes across Wales. One example is Faith in Families. Faith in Families is part of the Diocese of Swansea and Brecon's Board for Social Responsibility and run family centres in Swansea. Whilst the primary aim of their projects is fun, the schemes also provide food during their activities. Food is made available for all family members through both breakfast and lunch clubs, with research carried out by Faith in Families suggesting that the majority of people who receive food through these services live in families where at least one family member is in some form of work.³⁴

Another example is the Fit and Fed programme, run by Street Games in conjunction with partner organisations. Children who attend the activities are provided with a lunch and are also encouraged to participate in at least an hour of physical activity. The scheme is supported by the Coca Cola Foundation and also incorporates use of surplus food. Street Games offer local groups a tool kit³⁵ to help set up schemes, including guidance on core and optional elements of schemes (figure 2) and how to secure local funding.

3.3 Low cost food schemes

There are several schemes in Wales that aim to reduce the cost of food, such as food co-ops and community pantries. They share a common purpose, providing good quality food at affordable prices to families on low incomes. As with emergency food aid, cheap food schemes have not been developed solely to tackle holiday hunger but as an answer to food insecurity and poverty more generally. The support they provide, however, can be particularly important during school holidays when many families see their incomes stretched.

Figure 2 Fit and Fed Scheme template



Source: Street Games

An example of a low cost food scheme that is being developed in Wales is Action in Caerau and Ely's (ACE) Community Pantry.³⁶ The aim of the scheme is to provide families with affordable, healthy food without the stigma many families feel when using foodbanks. The community pantry model is membership-based, with members being able to collect 10 items of food a week in return for a small weekly fee. Whilst dependent on the support of volunteers to help run the scheme and donations from Fairshare to ensure that the food will be affordable, the Community Pantry is run as a social business, with the members' fees helping to make the scheme sustainable in the longer term.

4. EMERGING ISSUES

The different approaches to solving holiday hunger all play valuable roles. However, there are some key issues that need to be addressed as provision increases in the future. Many of these issues emerged from discussion at a Bevan Foundation seminar held on 7th February 2019.

4.1 Understanding the problem

A full understanding of the nature, scale and extent of holiday hunger, both locally and at national level, is essential to ensure that provision is adequate. However, lack of data means that the answers to key questions are unknown:

- how prevalent is child food insecurity and holiday hunger?
- is holiday hunger concentrated in certain geographic locations?
- is there a particular age at which children are more likely to face holiday hunger?
- are there certain household types which are more likely to face holiday hunger?
- how would children who are faced with holiday hunger like to be supported?

This information is vital to plan and monitor provision.

4.2 Reach and inclusion

Although the full extent of holiday hunger is not clear, it is likely that the current approaches do not reach everyone who needs support. In 2018 the SHEP programme involved 2,500 children,³⁷ its largest provision to date. However, there are around 76,200 children who are eligible for free school meals in Wales³⁸ and some 180,000 children living in poverty.³⁹ There are plans to increase the scope of current provision for the summer of 2019 and beyond. The Welsh Government's budget, for example, allocates an extra £0.4 million to grow the SHEP programme for the 2019/20 financial year.⁴⁰ Nevertheless it is unlikely that the funding will be sufficient to reach all children receiving Free School Meals let alone all children in poverty.

There are also questions about the ability of schemes, including SHEP and other types of provision, to reach specific groups of children. Many schemes are targeted at primary rather than secondary school children. Although there are some SHEP schemes that run in special schools and areas of high ethnic diversity, in other schemes there are questions about the involvement of children from Black and Asian Minority Ethnic communities and disabled children.

4.3 Criteria for eligibility

Some, but not all, types of scheme set criteria for participation. The criteria vary from being assessed by a professional as needing assistance (as with foodbanks), being in receipt of certain benefits (as with food hampers), or living in an area where there is a scheme operating (as with community schemes and SHEP programmes).

There are advantages and disadvantages to different approaches. Schemes based on receipt of certain benefits may exclude children in working families on low incomes. Requiring families to apply for support may create a stigma to participation while universal provision may mean scarce resources are used supporting children and families who do not need it.

4.4 Standards

As the number of schemes and providers grow, there are issues emerging about the standards of provision in some cases. Although SHEP schemes are quality assured against high standards, some others do not have the same requirements. In terms of nutritional standards, it is widely agreed that holiday programmes should provide a good quality, healthy and ideally hot meal. Schemes which offer filling but familiar foods, such as sandwiches or pasties, may fill up hungry children but are not an adequate main meal and do not extend children's interest in, access to and awareness of healthy foods. They could inadvertently contribute to widening health inequalities.

Issues were also raised about the need for provision to comply fully with safeguarding requirements, including the ratio of adults to children, checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service and availability of first aid skills and equipment.

4.5 Reducing stigma

Many children and families may be deterred from participating in holiday schemes because of concern about stigma. This already affects take up of free school meals - for example, on school census day in 2017/18, 24 per cent of children who were eligible for a free school meal did not eat one.⁴¹ Simple actions such as careful naming of schemes, discreet application of any eligibility criteria and provision of additional services to appeal to parents (such as free wifi or phone charging points) can help to reduce any negative perceptions of participation.

4.6 Planning and co-ordination

At present there is limited local planning and co-ordination of provision. Community-based schemes are dependent on the ability and capacity of local groups to set up and run provision, while SHEP schemes depend on the willingness of the local authority and school governors and staff to operate school-based activities. The result is significant gaps in provision – for example 2018, eight local authorities did not participate in SHEP.⁴² Even when more local authorities participate, as is expected in 2019, by no means all eligible schools will do so.

At the same time as there are gaps there are also risks of duplication - anecdotal evidence suggests that some community schemes have previously run in competition with some SHEP schemes.

4.7 Building capacity

There is a difficult balance to be struck between providing immediate support with supporting families to provide for themselves. Holiday provision could help to address some of the bigger challenges faced by families.

Holiday provision has an opportunity to break the cycle of poor nutrition, for example by increasing understanding what constitutes a healthy diet, demonstrating how to create low-cost meals and learning basic cooking skills. SHEP for example works alongside the Nutrition Skills for Life programme which aims to be build community capacity to support healthy eating.⁴³ ACE, on the other hand, intend to provide cookery lessons to interested families who become members of their Community Pantry. Offering benefit checks or debit advice to families participating in holiday provision may also help to boost household incomes.

5. SOLUTIONS

It is a national scandal that growing numbers of children in Wales have an inadequate diet in the school holidays simply because their parents or carers do not have enough money to feed them. Under international law both the UK and Welsh Governments are obliged to ensure that children have an adequate standard of living, and it is time they took action.⁴⁴

The root causes of holiday hunger are inextricably linked to poverty in Wales. To find a long-term solution to holiday hunger, it is therefore vital that the Welsh and UK Governments continue their efforts to solve poverty more generally by ensuring families have an adequate income and by minimising living costs. There are, in addition, specific actions that could significantly reduce the number of families experiencing holiday hunger in both the short term and looking further ahead.

5.1 Enhancing holiday provision

The quickest and most effect way of reducing the number of children with an inadequate diet in the school holidays is to improve and extend the provision of support. There are already some excellent schemes and programmes in Wales: they should be built on to increase participation and ensuring high quality provision.

5.1.1 Increasing and co-ordinating provision

Our starting point is that no child should have an inadequate diet in the school holidays. We endorse the recommendations of the Children's Commissioner for Wales and the Children's Future Food Inquiry that coverage of SHEP schemes should be enhanced.

We recommend that a place on such schemes should be guaranteed for any child on a low income. The Welsh Government has provided for an additional £0.4 million in 2019/20 which is a very welcome start.⁴⁵ However at an average cost of between £19.37 and £26.72 per day per child,⁴⁶ the additional funding provides a place for 12 days for approximately 1,500 extra children. Significant further investment will be required if provision is to begin to reach enough children to make a difference. Providing a place for a quarter of all children eligible for free school meals for 12 days based on costs in the lower quartile of the cost spectrum will require total expenditure of approximately £4.75 million a year.⁴⁷ We recognise that budgets are extremely tight, but consider that this sum is relatively modest on the scale of Welsh Government spending, and that it is an investment in the wellbeing of thousands of children.

This budget should not only be available for SHEP schemes but for those operated by community groups, faith groups and other public and charitable bodies, provided they meet minimum criteria.

Local authorities should play an active role in planning and co-ordinating provision. Funds should be allocated to them to reflect on the number of children receiving free school meals in their area. As part of an authority's co-ordination role, we endorse the call by the South Wales Food Poverty Alliance that local authorities should map existing provision.⁴⁸ The mapping should include publicly-funded schemes and those funded by charitable funds or an organisation's own resources, to gain a comprehensive picture.

5.1.2 Improving standards

Setting and maintaining high standards are essential to delivering good quality schemes. The evaluation of the School Holiday Enrichment Programme in 2017 piloted a Quality Assurance Framework in schools in Cardiff and recommended that it be rolled-out to all

SHEP schemes in future years. We recommend that the core criteria for SHEP schemes should apply to any holiday scheme i.e. they:

- Operate for at least 4 hours per day, for at least 12 days
- Provide a healthy lunch and drinks (and breakfast if relevant)
- Offer at least 1 hour of age-appropriate structured physical activity per day.
- Provide a family meal for parents/carers and siblings at least once per week.

In addition, we recommend that all holiday schemes receiving public funds should fully comply with the essential standards below. While SHEP schemes already comply, others may not:

Safeguarding: All schemes, however funded, should be able to demonstrate compliance with relevant legislation and standards regarding safeguarding of children, health and safety requirements, and child – adult ratios. Schemes for children under 12 years old should be registered with the Care and Social Services Inspectorate, unless safeguarding standards are met through other means or schemes are exempt. These standards should apply to all forms of provision, however funded. Local authorities should provide clear guidance on requirements and should monitor compliance.

Nutrition: Every meal provided through holiday programmes should be based on high nutritional standards, at a minimum meeting the same standards applied to school meals as set out in statutory guidance.⁴⁹ Providers should aim to offer a hot meal and a variety of different foods for children to try, and should involve parents, carers and siblings in at least one meal a week. Holiday provision experts recommend avoiding foods like sandwiches which children may well receive frequently already, and foods with low nutritional value such as pasties and fizzy drinks.⁵⁰ While donated food e.g. from supermarkets can have an important role to play, it should not compromise quality.

Inclusion: Publicly-funded schemes should take active steps to ensure that they are accessible to all children including disabled children and children of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. This involves not only ensuring physical access of premises and that food is suitable for different religious beliefs, but also creating a welcoming and supportive culture. As part of this, schemes should not use language that might create stigma e.g. referring to holiday hunger.

Last, while standards are important, schemes running in schools should not adopt usual school rules, for example on acceptable clothing or hairstyles.

5.1.3 Variety of provision

Part of the benefits of holiday schemes is that they provide activities for children as well as food. Many schemes have a strong sporting element, not least because of the health benefits of physical activity, but not all children enjoy sport. There should therefore be a variety of different types of activity on offer, including arts and crafts, drama and music, as well as sport and games.

Similarly, while the School Holiday Enrichment Programme is school-based, we can see an important role for provision in other settings such as community centres. Alternatives to school provision may be more accessible for children who live some distance away from their school, for example those in rural areas, and provision in other settings may appeal to children who may not want to attend school premises in the holidays.

As part of their mapping of provision, local authorities should encourage different types of activity so that there is something to appeal to all children.

5.1.4 The format and duration of provision

There are many different scheme formats: some are half-day, some are full day; some provide daily provision for at least four weeks of the summer holidays while others run only once or twice a week. Flexibility is key – parents and carers should be involved in planning provision, and attendance should be entirely voluntary.

The evaluation of SHEP recommended that schemes should operate for a minimum of 12 days,⁵¹ while some have suggested that the optimum is provision for four weeks over the summer holidays. In the absence of evidence on the optimum format, we recommend that publicly-funded schemes should offer at least 12 days provision over a period of at least three weeks.

5.1.5 A whole family approach

A whole family approach to provision has been found to be key to success, with families involved in planning, preparing and eating meals, participating in other activities, and taking up any additional services offered. Providing additional facilities or activities can also be popular with low-income families, e.g. offering free wifi or phone chargers, providing debt advice or benefit checks, or opportunities for parents and carers to learn new skills e.g. basic IT or job-search skills.

5.2 Making it happen

If stepping up holiday provision is to reach children who need it and offer them good food and great fun, then action needs to be taken to put provision on a secure financial footing, and to co-ordinate provision at local level and to ensure high standards.

We recommend that the National Assembly for Wales introduces legislation to require local authorities to ensure that there are sufficient programmes to provide food and activities for children in school holidays, and to specify minimum standards that publicly-funded schemes should meet.

Draft legislation with a similar purpose was introduced as a private member's bill in England – it included the following clause⁵²:

- (1) A local authority must facilitate and coordinate the provision of programmes, during school holidays, that provide meals and activities for children in their area.
- (2) In exercising its duty under subsection (1), a local authority shall, in respect of the days of those activities, secure the provision of a free meal to a child if a request for the provision of such meals has been made by or on behalf of that child to the authority.

Legislation should be accompanied by provision in the Welsh Government's 2020/21 budget of a minimum of £4.75 million for allocation to eligible local authority and third sector holiday schemes. Local authorities should be provided with a modest resource to fulfil this duty, covering administrative costs as well as funding for schemes.

5.3 Boosting family incomes

The long-term solutions to holiday hunger lie in reducing poverty amongst families and increasing access to affordable, good food. The major levers of change – notably boosting pay rates, reforming the benefits system for working age people, and cutting costs of basics – involve major structural changes to the labour market, social security system and economy. They require UK-wide action and take time.

There is, however, action that can be taken in Wales, by the Welsh Government and other public bodies, to boost family incomes when they are under pressure in the school holidays. These recommendations, taken together, could help families to cope.

5.3.1 Holiday income supplement

Families whose incomes are low enough for their child to receive a free school meal suddenly lose that help over the summer holidays, as well as facing many other additional costs. The UK social security system includes the ability to provide ‘top-up’ payments in certain circumstances. For example Winter Fuel Payment provides adults born on or before the 5th November 1953 with a contribution of between £100 and £300 towards their winter fuel costs⁵³, and Cold Weather Payments provide £25 a week extra to working age claimants of certain benefits if the average temperature is zero degrees celsius or below for seven consecutive days.⁵⁴ There is a strong case of additional benefit payments during the school holidays when families face similar seasonal pressures.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government is exploring how best to target and deliver its planned income supplement for families, with implementation scheduled for 2022. There is as yet no indication of how this supplement might be used. Research by the Poverty and Inequality Commission in Scotland found that families preferred a direct cash payment to assist them in dealing with the additional financial challenges that they encountered during the school holidays.⁵⁵ The Commission argue that the level of cash support provided to families through such a system should be at least equal to cost of school meals. Cash payments have the advantage of offering families choice, retains their dignity and ensures that all low-income families receive their entitlement.

While the Welsh Government does not have powers to vary UK benefits or supplement them with cash payments, its interest in ‘exploring’ devolution of some powers over the social security system makes the potential to pay additional benefits a long-term possibility. There are several ways such payments could be made, e.g. via Universal Credit payments (although this has significant draw-backs),⁵⁶ or via local authorities’ administration of the Pupil Development Grant – Access.

Providing an extra £25 per week per child over the 6 weeks of the summer holidays for all children who are eligible for free school meals would cost approximately £10 million a year.⁵⁷ However, given that there are 55,000 children in Wales living in poverty who are not eligible for free school meals because someone in their family works⁵⁸ and with research suggesting that only around a third of children experiencing holiday hunger are eligible for free school meals,⁵⁹ this is only a first step.

5.3.2 Targeted use of the Discretionary Assistance Fund

The Discretionary Assistance Fund is a £2 million pot administered by the Welsh Government.⁶⁰ Its Emergency Assistance Fund provides grants to help with the costs of dealing with an emergency, and will help with costs of clothing, food and electricity. The examples quoted are fire or a flood, but the fund can also help with lesser emergencies such as lost or stolen money, or extreme weather.

We agree with the call by the South Wales Food Network that the Fund should be used to support families over the five-week (or longer) wait for Universal Credit payments.⁶¹ Indeed, it could be argued that the ending of free school meals constitutes an emergency for low income families and that all families whose children are in receipt of free school meals should be eligible.

5.3.3 Flexible budgeting for low income families

While the fundamental problem facing low income families in the school holidays is that they do not have enough income from earnings or benefits, families may be able to manage their limited finances over the holiday period if they can minimise outgoings. One way to do this would be to allow families flexibility in budgeting over the summer period, so that regular payments e.g. for rent, council tax and utilities are spread over ten or eleven months of the year so omitting an August payment.

Many local authorities already collect council tax over ten rather than twelve months, with no payments in February or March, so rescheduling the months in which no payment is collected ought to be feasible. Similarly, social landlords could offer 'rent holidays' or 'planned arrears' in the summer by spreading rent payments over ten or eleven months. Housing costs are the single largest cost faced by most families and making August rent-free could free up significant additional disposable income.

We acknowledge that council tax and rent flexibility may not help households receiving help with their housing costs as variation in payment due could affect their benefit entitlement. Similarly, not all households may want the additional expenditure that would be required outside the holiday period. Nevertheless, we recommend that the Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association and Community Housing Cymru explore the options together with people experiencing poverty and conduct fully-evaluated pilot schemes.

6. CONCLUSION

For too many children, the school holidays are not a time of idyllic fun but are when they no longer get breakfast and lunch at school and have too little to do. The pressures are caused by poverty more generally, exacerbated by the loss of free school meals, extra costs such as childcare and possibly reduced household income.

There is an emerging patchwork of provision, some doing great work for children in their communities. But as the scale of the problem grows, it is time for the Welsh Government to take action. We recommend:

1. increasing investment in a range of types of holiday schemes to at least £4.75 million a year, enabling approximately 16,000 children to benefit
2. setting high standards for nutrition, scheme activities, safeguarding and parent / carer involvement for all schemes, based on the School Holiday Enrichment Programme
3. enacting legislation so that local authorities can co-ordinate sufficient holiday provision
4. providing access to emergency financial support to families in school holidays via the Discretionary Assistance Fund
5. helping families with budgeting during the holidays, by allowing flexible payments of essentials e.g. rents
6. in the long term, boosting family incomes with a holiday income supplement.

Taken together, these measures would mean that no child has an inadequate diet in the summer holidays because their family does not have enough money.

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