

## **Holiday Activities and Food programme - Summer 2021 Lessons for policy and practice**

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In 2017, Feeding Britain drafted the School Holiday (Meals and Activities) Bill which called on the Government to initiate, for the very first time, a national programme of holiday provision for children and families. Having won cross-party support from more than 120 MPs, led by our Trustee Frank Field, the Bill succeeded in gaining a commitment from the Government to introduce a three-year pilot programme, between 2018 and 2020, under the banner of 'Holiday Activities and Food' (HAF).

For 2021, the Government made good on its commitment to scale up HAF, with £220 million made available to local authorities in England to coordinate free holiday activities and food over Easter, Summer and Christmas holidays. The programme was open to all children who receive benefits-related free school meals.

Funding for each area was determined by the numbers of children eligible for and in receipt of free school meals, and overall levels of participation experienced in previous programmes from 2018 to 2020.

The HAF programme was open to all children who receive benefits-related free school meals. Provision over the summer was to be available to children for four weeks, across four hours per day, and four days per week (the 4 x 4 x 4 model). The programme was to also include fun, enriching physical activities and nutrition education for children and families. Children could expect to receive at least one meal per day which met school food standards.

This report summarises the lessons for policy and practice, garnered from the Feeding Britain network over summer 2021. While the programme has already become a popular and effective resource for hundreds of thousands of families across England, there are a number of lessons to emerge from the first year of HAF's national rollout. These lessons will, if applied, make this incredibly good programme an even better one for years to come.

### **A popular and effective programme**

- The overwhelming sentiment among children, parents, and holiday clubs is that they want to see HAF continue in future.
- Children reported having fun, memorable, and healthy summers and that they enjoyed taking part in HAF.
- Parents and carers reported that HAF has been a significant source of support for them, particularly in respect of managing household budgets and the provision of food during

the holidays, as well as accessing childcare and structured activities that keep their older children safe so they could remain in work and continue to earn money.

### **Making a good programme even better: longer-term funding, lead-in times and half term provision**

- A guarantee of longer-term funding from the Department for Education would result in a programme that is even better and more efficient. In particular, this could underpin:
  - Dedicated capacity, training, and facilities within holiday clubs and HAF providers which strengthens programme delivery and contributes to more resilient community organisations
  - Investment in systems and governance structures, especially at a local authority level, that will ensure the smooth running of and maximum impact from the programme
  - Longer-term relationships with organisations who are well placed to support the programme
  - Leveraging additional resources and support from private, public and voluntary sector partners
  - Trust and confidence among families who can then factor this into their plans around work, childcare, and budgets for the year
- Holiday clubs and HAF providers have noted that January of each year would be the optimal time to receive detailed information of their HAF funding allocation for that year, so they can plan accordingly from that point.
- In many areas, the timescales in which to plan and deliver HAF were the key challenge, impacting all aspects of the programme. Often, the governance structures and grant application processes for activity providers to apply for funding were announced very late. This was a particular issue in areas with a two-tier authority, where announcement of the district allocation happened even later. This had a knock-on impact on activity providers having time to prepare, food arrangements to be made, and marketing and promotion to families. In turn, this impacted the quality of provision and take up of the programme. Securing a longer-term commitment of funding and announcing funding plans earlier would ease these issues. In areas that had run pilot programmes previously, they could see the benefits of running the programme year-on-year. Providers reported that young people who had accessed the programme last year now felt confident enough to take on young leadership roles and peer support in some of the physical activities.
- There is also a need for provision during the half term holidays - October, February and May. In some areas the local authority has committed funding to cover provision during these holidays too.
- Due to challenging timescales and limited experience, local authority HAF co-ordinators would benefit from training to engage with colleagues across departments to raise awareness of the multiple benefits that HAF delivers, and secure stronger buy-in and capacity support from local authority departments such as public health, social services, community safety, financial inclusion, museums and libraries, community cohesion, and adult learning.

## Eligibility criteria

- There are challenges associated with the eligibility criteria for the programme being restricted to children on free school meals. Many families and young people that are not eligible for free school meals are still in need of support over the holidays. In some areas, this criterion has led to cumbersome systems – for example, with children required to show a code before they can access the club, and families being turned away on the day. It also presents challenges with some children not being able to attend a club with their friends.
- In a number of areas, the Department for Education granted permission for a local authority to offer holiday club places for children who are not in receipt of free school meals, with requests being considered to use up to 15% of programme funding to provide places for children who were considered by the local authority as vulnerable or in need of this provision. This may have included children assessed as being in need, looked-after children, children with an education, health and care plan, or children assessed as otherwise vulnerable and children living in areas of high deprivation. In the areas where this permission was granted with enough lead-in time, the delivery of targeted universal provision (i.e. promoting HAF in target areas or to target groups, but being open to all children) has generally worked very well and partners have fed back that this would be a preferable model.

## Flexibility is key

- The areas that saw the greatest success in their programmes were those that were able to take a flexible approach wherever possible, within the Department for Education's criteria. This included:
  - Flexibility in the grant application process to support and include a broad range of organisations, particularly smaller scale community organisations with existing trusted relationships with families experiencing the highest levels of deprivation.
  - Flexibility in eligibility criteria to ensure that all families who could benefit from the programme could access it.
  - Flexibility in activities and food offered to appeal to older young people. For example, pop-up provision in parks.
  - Flexibility in the food provision to meet the changing demands of clubs - often there were very last-minute changes of venue, numbers or dietary requirements. This also applied to the types of food provided e.g. offering nutritious cold packed lunches for parks or day trips.

## Communication

- In many areas, communication around HAF could be strengthened. In particular:
  - Communication with potential activity providers to engage them with the programme - some activity providers reported that they were applying for funding once the programme had already started
  - Communication with potential partner agencies such as advice services, food banks and affordable food networks - opportunities were sometimes lost to connect families with these support services through the programme

- Communication to families, to make them aware of HAF - in some areas take-up was lower than expected with eligible families not knowing about the programme until late in the summer
- Tight timescales were a key factor that negatively impacted upon communication. Some areas had a dedicated lead for communication which proved effective. Generally, marketing of the programme was found to be most effective through the activity providers' existing networks, rather than through local authority or central programme channels and social media.

### Strength of communities

- A key success factor was drawing on the existing strengths in communities. There is already amazing work happening on the ground, with many community groups, charities and food providers with extensive experience of delivering holiday programmes and engaging the families who can most benefit from the programme. It is important to ensure that grant application processes and other tendering processes are inclusive of these organisations.
- There are opportunities to build the capacity of these organisations through the programme, and to channel funding back into the local community. Engagement of these groups may require dedicated time, for example to support organisations with training or consultancy. An example of this is support from Environmental Health Officers with registration and inspection of organisations' kitchens to enable them to provide food in the programme. There are opportunities here to strengthen the programme year on year through investing time and resource in these community organisations.
- Many of these organisations are embedded in local communities, with a commitment to longer-term outcomes; HAF provides them with an opportunity to connect HAF holiday club users to their other support services and activities that help local children and families beyond the school holidays.

### Models of food provision

- Generally, food provision in HAF worked best where the activity providers are involved in, and have choice over, the food the children will be eating. This could be through funding being granted directly to the activity provider. They could then either:
  - Provide their own food on site
  - Or, identify a local food provider that would supply food to their site.
- Providing food on site typically gave more opportunities to engage children and families in food preparation and nutrition. Children were more enthusiastic and willing to try new food when they were part of the process, for example, filling jacket potatoes or making pizza and fruit skewers or even through growing and harvesting food for their HAF mealtimes.
- Many areas also offered a 'central food service' where the HAF programme team would commission and deliver food to the activity providers. This option took some of the pressure off activity providers to plan their food provision, and was an invaluable part of the programme. However, there were often challenges in terms of logistics, suitability of menus and quality. There are also environmental considerations - clubs providing their own food on-site typically had fewer food-miles than off-site provision.

## Menus

- Some areas reported challenges in finding a menu that was nutritious and varied, yet also was something that the children would enjoy. Some providers found it worked well to offer a simple packed lunch for three days of the week, and then have one day a week where the menu introduces children to foods they may not have tried before.
- Initially the Department for Education stated that a hot meal should be provided wherever possible in the programme, however they later acknowledged that in many circumstances this would not be an option and a cold meal was also suitable provided it met the standards. This flexibility proved very important, for example for activity providers running in parks and other outdoor spaces with limited facilities. This was particularly relevant given the risks of Covid-19. Longer term, this flexibility enables local authorities to support continuous improvement amongst local providers who are new to food provision.

## Engaging children and families in nutrition

- The Department for Education required providers to include an element of nutritional education each day for children, as well as at least weekly training and advice sessions for parents, carers or other family members. In many areas this could benefit from further development, however examples of excellent practice include:
  - In person or online cook-a-long sessions for families with ingredients provided
  - Children growing fruit and vegetables throughout the programme, and learning to cook with these
  - Programmes centred around food, with professional chefs teaching children over the summer, ending in a banquet with children cooking for families and leaders
  - Taste tests for unusual foods or finger painting with spices mixed with water
  - Heat-at-home meals with a QR code to scan to a video and simple recipe to recreate the meal at home
  - Food themed days out for the children, for example to pick-your-own fruit farms, city farms or cooking experiences
- Many areas fed back that more could have been done to engage activity leaders in nutrition and increase their confidence in these aspects. Additional support could be given here through training and shareable resources.

## Food insecurity

- HAF has highlighted the levels of food insecurity in England. Some local authorities allocated funding to provide food boxes for families. These could either be a full weekly shop for the family, or recipe boxes to be used during family cook-a-longs in the home. In many areas, demand for these food boxes far exceeded expectations.
- Many activity providers involved with HAF have expressed interest in providing ongoing food support year-round, for example by launching an affordable food project such as a pantry, or food growing schemes. This would also enable them to build trusted relationships with families over the year, thus strengthening the HAF programme's engagement with these families too.

## Reaching secondary-aged young people

- Some areas, although not all, found their programme worked particularly well for primary-aged children, but they struggled to reach secondary-aged children or maintain attendance from this age group. Partners felt that the typical HAF structure, of 4 hours per day, 4 days per week in an activity club may not appeal so strongly to older young people. They also felt that the free school meal eligibility criteria were least effective for this age group, with young people not able to attend with their friends. Areas that had success in engaging older young people typically already had strong youth sectors and activity providers with good relationships with these young people. Flexible provision, such as pop-up activities or events in parks worked particularly well to engage older young people.
- Some larger activity providers had success engaging secondary-aged young people as leaders for sessions. For the young people, this was a chance to develop leadership skills as well as socialise with friends who were also involved. The activity provider would then ensure the young people had physical activity, skill development sessions and food as part of this role.

## Engaging schools

- While there were some notable successes, some areas had challenges engaging schools either to act as activity providers or to make their venues available for other activity providers to use them. There were a range of reasons for this including:
  - Schools having building works over the summer so the buildings were not accessible
  - Staff needing a break over the summer, particularly having worked through the pandemic
  - Logistics of opening the building and having the appropriate staff on site
  - Capacity challenges if schools were involved in the summer school catch-up programme
- Similarly, many areas felt they could have done more to promote the programme through schools to families before they broke up for the summer.
- Looking ahead, many areas are planning to start engaging schools in the programme much earlier. Longer term funding and an earlier announcement of the funding allocation would help with this.

## Registration systems

- In many areas there were challenges in developing a user-friendly system, for parents to register their children for the programme. These issues seem to have been primarily driven by budget to invest in the system and time constraints. Often the registration system was launched very late, giving parents minimal time to see what was on offer and register their children. For families experiencing digital exclusion, the use of digital-only registration systems in some areas was a barrier. Some families reported that they found the process of registration such a challenge that they ended up not accessing the programme at all.

## Enrichment elements and at-home offer

- Alongside the holiday clubs, many areas were able to provide additional components of the programme including:
  - Day trips to fun local attractions including beaches, theme parks, theatre workshops, adventure parks and activities such as laser tag, bowling, swimming and kayaking.
  - Large-scale pop-up events such as city-centre beaches or food and music festivals.
  - At-home options such as recipe boxes, activity packs and virtual activities. This was often crucial due to clubs closing and families isolating with Covid-19.
- These elements were seen as a highlight of the programme in many areas. Having them towards the end of the summer was an effective way to encourage families and children to continue attending the programme for the duration. Large-scale events engaged large numbers of families and young people who may not have wanted to, or been able to, attend a full summer provision.