



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger: Inquiry into hunger amongst children during the school holidays

Submission from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the short inquiry into the extent of hunger amongst children during the school holidays and the impact that this has on their life chances.

Due to the timescale and limited capacity in my office, I regret only being able to provide a brief response, but I do hope to be able to pick up on the key themes outlined in the terms of reference and draw on Scottish evidence pertinent to this Inquiry.

Children and Young People's Commissioner, Scotland

The role of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people in Scotland with a particular emphasis focus on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other relevant international instruments.

The right to food

The right to food is a fundamental right protecting the right of all human beings to be free from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. It calls for food to be available, for people to have the means to access it, and for that food to adequately meet the individual's dietary needs. The principle obligation States have is to take steps to achieve progressively the full realisation of the right to adequate food. 'Progressive realisation recognises that not all States can achieve all economic, social and cultural rights immediately, but requires that they must do so as expeditiously as possible to the maximum extent of their available resources.

States also have immediate duties – non-discrimination, non-regression and guaranteeing the minimum core content of the right to food. Discrimination in access to food constitutes a violation of the right to food. Article 2 (2). Non-discrimination is not only about abolishing laws and policies which appear discriminatory, but also about responding to the needs of

different groups, such as children. States are also prohibited to take retrogressive measures; deliberate measures which result in the deterioration of the current level of fulfilment of the right to food.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

In our submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (June 2016), *Examination of the Fifth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*¹, the four UK Commissioners raised concerns that the UK State Party's response to the global economic downturn, including the imposition of austerity measures and changes to the welfare system, had resulted in a failure to protect the most disadvantaged children from child poverty, preventing the realisation of their rights under Articles 26 and 27 of the UNCRC. We also noted that the best interests of children were not central to the development of these policies and that children's views were not sought.

In our report, we also noted that reductions to household income for poorer children as a result of tax, transfer and social security benefit changes had led to food and fuel poverty, and the sharply increased use of crisis food bank provision by families. Much of this chimes with the findings in the Inquiry report, *Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland* and your subsequent reports.

In its response to the UK report, through its Concluding Observations (2016), the Committee on the Rights of the Child raised concern about the lack of comprehensive data on child food security and stated that some research indicates that currently available programmes, such as free school meal programmes, may not be effectively responding to child hunger. It urged the state party (the UK as a whole) to systematically collect data on food security and nutrition for children, including those relevant to breastfeeding, overweight and obesity, in order to identify the root causes of child food insecurity and malnutrition and to regularly monitor and assess the effectiveness of policies and programmes on child food security and nutrition, including school meal programmes and food banks, and programmes addressing infants and young children²...

¹ http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/UNCRC%20final_0.pdf

² http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGBR%2fCO%2f5&Lang=en

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

I also drew on evidence from your Inquiry and follow up reports in my submission to the application of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)³, highlighting the increased reliance of people on low incomes on charitable food banks and noting that the rising costs of housing, food and fuel impacts on the ability of households to buy and cook food. In its Concluding Observations, that Committee expressed concern about the lack of adequate measures adopted by the State party to address the increasing levels of food insecurity, malnutrition, including obesity, and the lack of adequate measures to reduce the reliance on food banks.

It also recommended that the State party develop a comprehensive national strategy for the protection and promotion of the right to adequate food in order to address food insecurity in all jurisdictions of the State party and to promote healthier diets. It also recommended that the State party introduce higher taxes on junk foods and sugary drinks and consider adopting strict regulations on the marketing of such products, while ensuring improved access to healthy diets. The Committee referred the State party to its general comment No. 12 (1999) on the right to adequate food and the voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.

Holiday hunger

The Trussell Trust reports that a third of people depending on food banks are children: diet related health inequalities can have a major impact on educational attainment, emotional wellbeing and long term quality of life.

I am pleased that the APPG has now chosen to investigate this important issue. I would, however, emphasise that holiday hunger should not be seen in isolation, but rather within the wider context of poverty and food insecurity, and that proposed solutions should be responsive to this. In short, the issue is not just about food, but wider societal structural issues. In this regard, I note that this short inquiry follows on from the considerable amount of work undertaken by the APPG around hunger and food poverty in Britain which considers the structural causes of poverty in considerable detail and is helping to build a picture of the state of hunger and nutrition across the UK.

For most children holidays are something to look forward to, but for many families on low incomes they represent a difficult time, as there are additional costs other than finding the meals usually provided for in school. The need for help and support tends to grow during school holidays, where the need for child care and increased heating and cooking costs may also contribute. Some families also may have to reduce their working hours, which means a reduction in their income. We have heard that some children in receipt of free school meals during term time have arrived back at school in a worse physical and mental condition than when they left to go on holiday, having not had a decent meal during that period. Clearly this can have a detrimental impact on children's mental and physical wellbeing, as well as their educational attainment. It is not acceptable that children are failing because they cannot afford to eat. We need to ensure that no child goes hungry in the holidays

Extent of the problem

As noted and despite inroads into this through the work of the APPG and others, there remains limited population wide monitoring of food insecurity in the UK, including in Scotland, although the exponential rise of food banks is evident. The Trussell Trust reported that in 2015-2016 there were 133,726 referrals for emergency food parcels in Scotland, a significant increase from the 2013-2014 figure of 71,426. In 2012-2013, the figure was at 14,318, the 400% increase in referrals being directly attributable to welfare reform – including benefit delays and sanctions. The Trussell Trust also noted how this spiked during the holiday periods – Easter, summer recess and Christmas.

Together, the Scottish alliance for children's rights, produced the '*State of Children's Rights report*' in 2016.⁴ It noted the concerns of children's organisations and schools around children's access to food during school holiday periods, when free school meals were unavailable. It drew attention to the What Works Scotland report - '*The Cost of School Holidays*'⁵ which concluded that children from families with low incomes are more likely to experience malnourishment and damage to their health during school holidays owing to a range of issues including poverty and unavailable childcare provision. All of this can negatively impact not only a child's nutrition and health but also their learning and

⁴ *The State of Children's Rights report 2016*

(<http://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/pdfs/TogetherReport2016.pdf>)

⁵ *"The Cost of School Holidays" (2015) What Works Scotland and University of Glasgow*

(<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2015/07/>)

development opportunities, making the gap between children from low income families and those from higher socioeconomic groups more pronounced each year.

Targeted projects

Food, Families, Futures (Feb 2016-March 2019)

In response to the What Works report, projects targeting areas with the highest number of children entitled to free school meals, such as Dalmarnock, have been piloted to provide children with a healthy meal during school holidays as well as engaging them in activities. Dalmarnock and Ibrox Primary schools, both in Glasgow, ran summer holiday clubs between 4 and 29 July as part of Children in Scotland's Food, Families, Futures (FFF) programme. This proved "overwhelmingly popular" amongst local families - with interest exceeding capacity by up to 60%. The project is aiming to address food poverty and its links with wellbeing, learning and attainment. It is hoped that this will help reduce inequalities, particularly in areas of higher deprivation where the number of those receiving free school meals is about 30%. The main aims of the three-year partnership programme are to:

- Improve the health and wellbeing of children (and their families) living in and around the partnership areas, including increasing nourishment, reducing hunger and improving nutrition
- Improve the engagement and confidence of parents in their children's learning, resulting in improved early development, social inclusion, aspiration and attainment of children
- Increase support and commitment from the wider local community offering their time, energy and expertise to ensure the programme continues in years four, five and into the future to ensure sustainability

There are many other examples of initiatives across Scotland which seek to provide solutions to 'holiday hunger'. Aberdeen, Inverclyde and Edinburgh run food banks which also double up as holiday clubs. The focal point is on having fun and spending time with friends *"they just happen to get a meal at the start and the end. The motive is however to get food in their bellies."*⁶

Scotland's Independent Working Group on Food Poverty⁷ remarked that free schools entitlement breakfast clubs and food provided as part of school holiday activities and

⁶ Discussion with Trussell Trust Network Manager, 17th March 2017

⁷ 'Dignity. Ending Hunger Together in Scotland' Report of the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty (2016)

programmes not only relieve pressure on family budgets but ensure free access to healthy food for children and young people. One of its key recommendations was that Scottish Government and local authorities should prioritise investment in healthy meals at school and further explore the potential for providing healthy meals as part of school holiday programmes (Recommendation 13).

Child Poverty Action Group ‘The Cost of the School Holidays’ (December 2015)⁸

Child Poverty Action Group, Scotland undertook some recent research on the costs of the school holidays – how school holidays affected low income families in Glasgow and what it meant for their children’s holiday activities. They wanted to find out how current provision fit with the realities of these families and how such services could better meet their needs and ensure that they were used by low income children and young people..

Six focus groups were carried out with parents and three with children aged 6-13. These were complemented by two surveys, one with 223 parents and one with 59 voluntary sector workers. Challenges facing low income families during this period were not only around cost (e.g. paying for leisure activities, buying summer clothes, increased energy costs, childcare), which put a strain on budgets, but also emotional pressures, such as feeling guilty if the child could not afford to go on a holiday trip with their peers, relying on grandparents to provide support. Added to this was the challenge of non-working parents on JSA still having to actively seek work and sign on with their children and providing care when voluntary sector parent groups are reduced or withdrawn. Some families can also experience social isolation during the holidays, as they cannot afford to do activities, take their children out or invite friends. The result is that children can spend much of their holiday in the home.

There were numerous barriers to accessing holiday provision in Glasgow, including costs for holiday activities (including hidden costs such as snacks or transport), and payment options such as the need for advance payment or having to book online. Parents also do not always have access to information about free or low cost provision, services concentrated in certain parts of the city and lengthy waiting lists. The type of provision was also an issue, e.g. not always age appropriate or suitable for children with additional support needs and/or disabilities. Moreover, some activities may not always link into the working day for some parents, which creates problems for pick up or drop off.

⁸ Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland “The Cost of the School Holidays, Meeting the needs of low income families during school holidays (2015)

In terms of how holiday service providers across the city could better meet the needs of low income families, a call for better partnership was made as well, along with the need to address the lack of local facilities in some areas and consequent transport costs. Dormant school facilities were suggested as possibly being used to address a lack of facilities. Parents' childcare needs could also be addressed by looking at unsuitable timings for holiday activities that do not fit with working hours, as well as addressing the lack and affordability of childcare and out of school care provision.

In order to improve access and participation, many solutions were proposed, such as offering free, healthy lunches, addressing lengthy waiting lists and barriers in payment methods (e.g. on line). Providing holiday travel passes as an option was also proposed.

One key proposal was to adapt the content and delivery of holiday services by ensuring co-design of services with local people and diversifying content for different age ranges and support needs. We would reiterate the need to involve children and young people – asking their views and involving them in solutions. My office's research with Nourish and HomeStart illustrates this point.

Living is more important than just surviving (October 2016), Children's Commissioner, Nourish Scotland and HomeStart⁹

My office asked Nourish Scotland to ask young people what they thought about food insecurity (not just the immediate experience of a shortage of food, but the broader spectrum of experiences ranging from hunger uncertainty and including social, financial, geographical and nutritional considerations.) The research was undertaken with support and guidance from Home Start UK.

Children were confident in identifying the foods that children need and recognised the importance of a healthy and balanced diet, including the consequences of not having access to these foods. They were sensitive and perceptive to how financial restraints could be a barrier to children being able to eat the food they need and how that might make them and their parents feel. They understood that money could make a big difference to the amount and type of food eaten and had well developed ideas around coping mechanisms and solutions to food insecurity, recognising the responsibilities of a range of people including politicians. Solutions included making food more affordable and supporting charitable solutions. Whilst not all children felt that food banks were a fair solution – one said "*living is*

⁹ *Living is more important than just surviving* (Oct 2016) <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/ufiles/limitjs.pdf>

more important than surviving" (which became the title of the report), they did however recognise the barriers to realising the right to food.

What came through very strongly in the research was the need to listen to children's experiences and meaningfully involve them in developing solutions. If we fail to do that, we cannot address food insecurity in a way that respects protects and fulfils children's rights.

Concluding remarks

There is a clear need for holiday provision in terms of food, activity and support. This submission has only been able to touch upon a few examples and identify recent pieces of research. There are, however, a number of useful findings from this:

- Children and young people are extremely aware of food insecurity in their communities. Involving them appropriately and building trust must be part of the solution.
- Initiatives aimed at addressing holiday hunger should be universal. This will help to avoid the stigma that can come with targeted services.
- Initiatives should be located in existing facilities which the child is familiar with and which can quickly establish trust with the child or young person. Schools and former schools could provide meals and activities for children.
- Food should be incidental to the programme, rather than the focal point of the activity. CPAG refers to this as them not being "a feeding station for the poor", but being combined with activities which ease other holiday burdens on parents". Above all, the food must be nourishing.
- Locate support where people are based – the biggest barrier is unfamiliarity.
- Focusing on holiday hunger, while important, also needs to sit alongside other issues facing families during these periods, such as sourcing affordable local childcare and the need for accessible age-appropriate holiday activities for children (particularly those with disabilities).

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