



University of
Chester

**Impact Assessment of Holiday Activity
and Food Provision in Cheshire West and
Chester, Halton and Wirral
- Summer 2020:
Assessment of Provision and
Coordination under Covid19**

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Commissioned by: Edsential CIC and Partners



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Executive Summary

This report is an evaluation of the activities undertaken by Edsential and Partners during the summer of 2020. Edsential and its consortium were one of ten providers awarded funding by the Department of Education to coordinate activities and food provision in England, receiving £1.8 million of the £9 million allocated for 2020. Compared to the summer of 2019, the area of the provision under the care of Edsential has significantly increased, including Cheshire West and Chester, Wirral and Halton. The provision was organised through Partnership Boards created for each local area, and this report not only provides an impact assessment of the holiday food and activity provision, but also an evaluation of the partnerships and their functioning. The context of the provision has been affected by the Covid19 pandemic, and as such, researchers have also analysed how Covid19 has affected families, particularly during lockdown restriction periods, and the provision of activities.

This scheme was aimed at children, teenagers and their families, to be provided with food and activities over the summer break from school, with the purpose to at least cover the need of those children entitled to free school meals. Due to social distancing rules, the provision this summer has been mixed, with more providers than initially expected delivering face to face activities, with others focusing on the delivery of home packages of both food and activity kits, and a limited number of providers offering online activities only. The provision reached 11,471 young people over 155,904 attendance/engagement instances, with an estimated total of 147,554 meals provided (excluding breakfast or additional meals). This accounts for almost 52% of eligible children and teenagers across the three local areas.

It is clear that the provision targeted communities in need, and funding was positively received. Though the 4x4x4 system was the aim (4 hours x 4 days per week x 4 weeks), it was a welcome change to see flexibility in the way provision was organised, with the understanding that some provision was better than none, in communities where children and families would not have access to alternative leisure activities. The closure of schools and activity centres presented a challenge for some providers, as they could not count on their usual facilities to deliver their services. Families valued very positively the experience, particularly those who also received access to computers and internet dongles, which contributed to narrow the digital access gap. Effects of the lockdown on mental health and the positive contribution of the summer activities to improve aspects related to mental health, is one of the findings of this research. A concern repeated from last summer is the very limited offering for children in secondary school age, which needs to be addressed. From the organisational point of view, another common and repeated issue is the uncertainty over funding availability for future planning, as well as the very narrow timeframe to apply for funding, organise activities once funding is confirmed, and publicise them. It is expected that with the government's confirmation of funding available for school breaks this Christmas and through 2021 this issue could be addressed, though a long term approach is recommended.

Partnership boards seem to have worked successfully and participants value the variety in the membership, to learn from experiences and best practices of different groups. However there

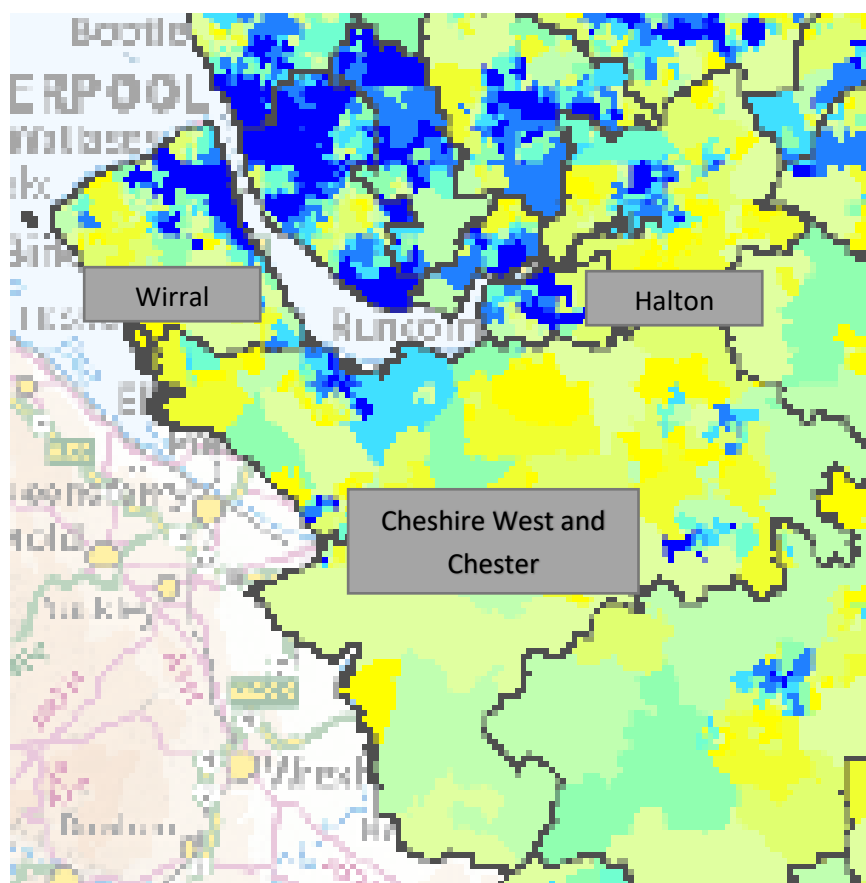
is room for improvement and lessons to be learnt, particularly with regard to commitment and continuity with the activities over time. In that regard, the addition of members with decision making power in each of the geographical areas would be a welcomed development.

Introduction

Cheshire is considered an affluent area, compared to other parts of the United Kingdom, but it is also an area of contrasts, with numerous pockets of poverty and deprivation. In the current context, in the middle of a health crisis created by the Covid19 pandemic, it is important to point out that the most significant type of deprivation in Cheshire West and Chester, one of the three areas covered by the summer provision and this report, is health deprivation and disability, affecting a population of 78,465 (CWaC, 2019). This means that quality of life for this population is negatively affected, among other factors, by poor physical and mental health, with an increased risk of premature death (CWaC, 2019).

Edsential was awarded £1.8 million by the Department of Education, to organise the provision of activities and food during the summer of 2020, extending the geographical area of coverage beyond Cheshire West and Chester (which was the focus in 2019), to adjacent areas in Merseyside, namely Wirral and Halton, which present higher levels of poverty and deprivation (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Map of the Index of Multiple Deprivation rank 2019.



Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) Crown Copyright.

Note: The darker the colour, the higher the level of deprivation.

In order to organise the provision and award funding to the different providers, Edsential partnered with representatives of the three geographical areas creating separated partnership boards. In Cheshire West and Chester, partners included the Local Authority/Public Health, the Welcome Network (Feeding West Cheshire) and Cheshire West Voluntary Action. These are the same partners as for the 2019 provision. For Wirral, partners included Feeding Birkenhead and West Wirral, Wirral Voluntary Action, which sits under Wirral Chamber of Commerce, Local Authority (LA) Children Services and a lead representative for community organisations that work across the Wirral. Halton provided representatives from HIMP/Public Health, a Head Teacher representing schools, Local Authority commissioning, Halton Voluntary and Community Action (VCA), Community Centres and Community organisations. The three groups will be referred to as 'the Partnership Boards' thereafter.

The University of Chester was approached by Edsential to provide an evaluation of the impact of the provision and the functioning of the partnership boards. In order to facilitate participation of all groups in the research and the activities, the University provided 30 laptops and 24 internet dongles, which were distributed through Edsential to providers in the three geographical areas, with a focus on those who were going to deliver online provision.

The key expected outcomes of the research project have been:

- To understand the impact and scale of the holiday activities and food provision during the specified time period.
- To understand the quality and the diversity of the holiday activities and food provision, and how it has been impacted by the lockdown.
- To understand the impact of the clubs on individuals, families, local and school communities.
- To understand the changes of behaviour which have resulted as part of the nutrition education delivered as a key element of the clubs.
- To understand what policy changes or services would be required to ensure that clubs were able to run during every school holiday.
- To understand whether further food support is required for young people and their families, and if so to make recommendations.
- To understand how provision and the situation of families and rest of stakeholders have been affected by Covid19.
- To understand the role and impact of the partnership boards

As such, the key objectives of the evaluation are:

- To work with a range of activity and food providers to develop a comprehensive understanding of impact and effectiveness of the holiday provision.

- To make a set of recommendations which create a blue print, or a list of success criteria for a holiday activity and food provision.
- To work with a range of organisations and community groups to explore the necessity of longer term food support and the services required.
- To provide a recommendation of roles, responsibilities and representation for the partnership board.

In the following sections, the methodology used to conduct the research and complete the report will be outlined, followed by the findings, organised by stakeholder groups and aspects of the provision. The report will finish with conclusions and recommendations for future interventions.

Methodology

This report follows the same methodology as the one completed for the summer 2019 provision (Francis et al. 2019), with the pertinent adaptations necessary to account for the increase in the number of geographical areas and providers to be covered, and for the restrictions imposed by social distancing rules, which meant that no visits to any of the facilities took place.

We apply a mixed methods approach, combining the analysis of statistical data provided by Edsential with the qualitative data extracted from a series of semi-structured interviews with providers (including schools), parents, children, and members of the Partnership Boards, including local area coordinators. These are complemented with data from online questionnaires answered by parents, children (primary and secondary school) and providers, and a small sample of paper questionnaires.

Interviews were conducted over the phone, or using Microsoft Teams or Zoom between August and September 2020. Statistical data are this year less comprehensive, as it was not required to provide information on gender, so analysis of this aspect is very limited. The approach to interviews and questionnaires received the pertinent ethical approval.

The main focus of the interviews were the providers, some of which were schools. In that regard, and compared to 2019, the coverage has increased considerably. While there were only 30 groups providing food and activities in Cheshire West and Chester (CWaC) during 2019, and the research team interviewed 15 of them, for 2020 there were 42 providers in the same area, with a total of 106 providers between the three areas. In total, the team interviewed 34 providers (32%), but another 14 filled in the online questionnaires, so we reached a coverage of 45%. Between interviews, paper and online questionnaires, we also collected information from 77 parents, 43 young people, and 12 members of the partnership boards.

The researchers relied on the area coordinators for the collection of paper questionnaires, and in this sense, lack of commitment with the research (secondary compared to the

provision itself) had a knock-on effect as for instance, not all the paper questionnaires were collected. The recommendations will include suggestions to address this issue for future iterations of the research, which are deemed necessary to complete a more comprehensive and longitudinal evaluation of the effects of the provision in both children and families.

Findings

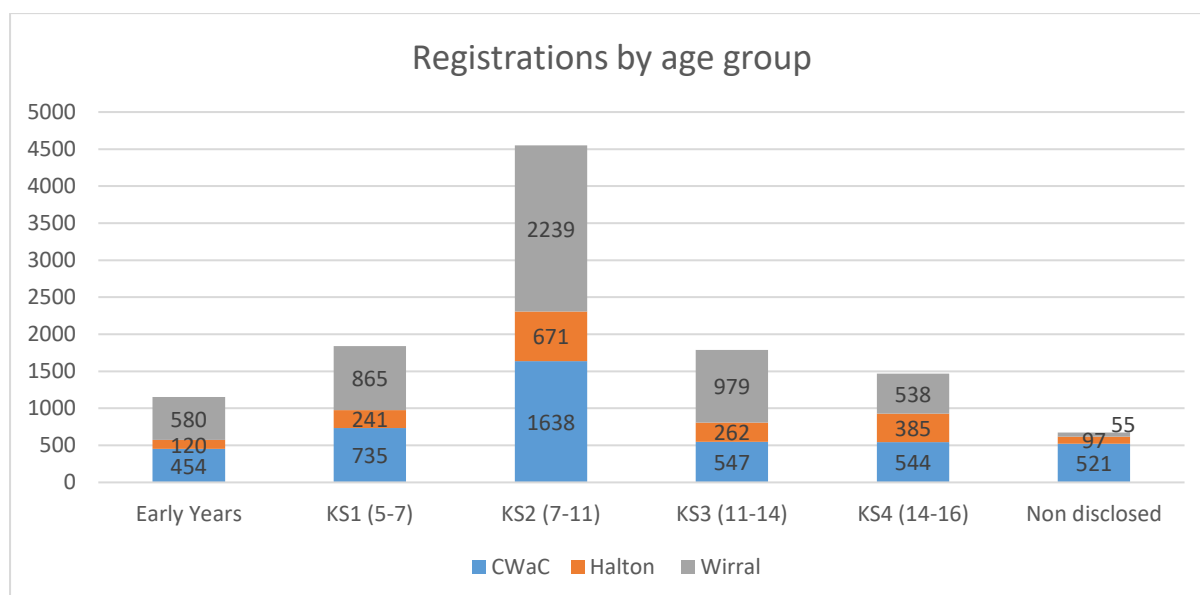
Edsential had set a target to reach 13,161 young people with the summer 2020 scheme, representing 58% of those eligible for free school meals within the three geographical areas. The final coverage was slightly lower, at 52%, with 11,471 young people benefitting from the activities and food provided, but this can be easily explained by the following factors:

- The government finally decided to continue with the provision of food vouchers during the summer holidays, which had not happened in previous summers, so some families may not have felt the need to use the provision of food and activities offered by the Holiday scheme. In that sense, it is estimated that families made wider use of the available food banks and food hubs created during the initial lockdown.
- Some families reported fear of going out and engage in activities that involved mixing with others, due to the dangers of Covid19.
- Some providers, in common with what happened in previous years, reported difficulties to promote the offering due to the lateness in the confirmation of the funds availability and the short time elapsed since to organise and publicise the offering. The closure of many schools also made promotion more difficult, and limited the reach of the communication efforts.

Bearing all that in mind, it can be argued that the summer provision was successful in reaching its goals. It needs to be clarified, however, that not all the young people who participated in the activities belong to the group officially entitled to free school meals (FSM), though the proportions are high, ranging between 76% in Halton and 85% in Wirral, with West Cheshire at 81%. As a difference with the previous year, this time it was not a requirement to be in the FSM group to register and participate in the activities. Halton is also the area with the lowest level of activity registered, in terms of number of young people, attendance/engagements, meals and food/activity boxes. Wirral, on the other hand, had the highest level of participation, in line with being the area with the highest proportion of eligible young people. In that sense, it is reasonable to conclude that the provision was well targeted.

The registrations by age group in each area are shown in Figure 2, below:

Figure 2. Registrations by age group and area



Source: Edsential

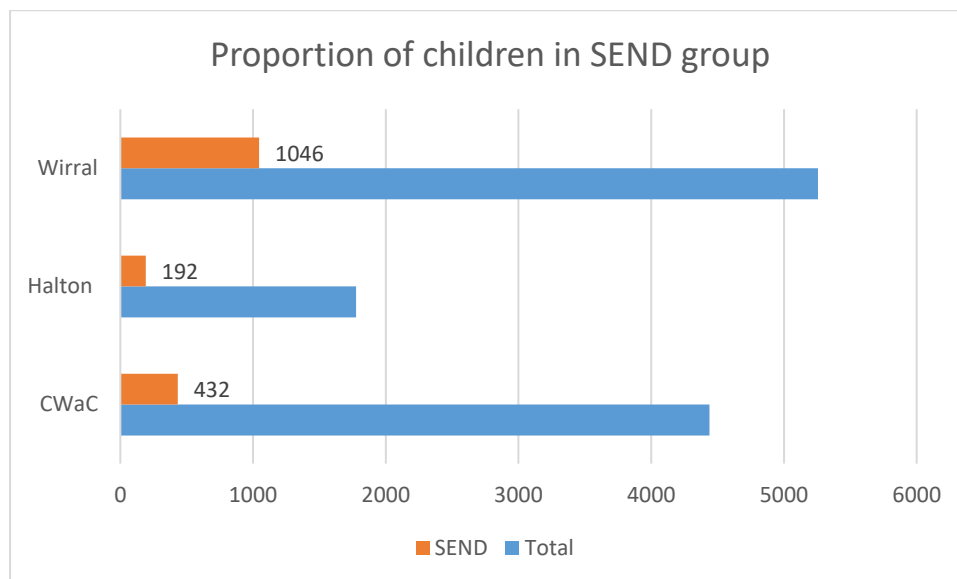
As in 2019, data indicate that the largest proportion of young people engaged in the holiday club activities belong to KS2 (between 7 and 11 years old). This is followed by KS1 and KS3 groups. This becomes a difference with the previous year, where the second largest group were early years (0 to 5). A possible explanation for this could be the perception in previous years of the holiday club as a day care service, particularly for the youngest in the family, while parents could go to work or support siblings in other age groups. In 2020, due to the pandemic, parents have stayed at home for longer, sometimes made redundant or in furlough, so they could dedicate more time to the care of the youngest children, while other age groups would be interested on doing different activities instead of staying at home. It is true, however, that parents who continued working from home during the first lockdown, struggled to cope and find the right balance to support children home schooling, take care of the youngest ones, and keep up with their daily work duties.

Data also reflect differences by area, with Halton presenting proportionally more participation in the KS4 group (14 to 16 years old), but in general it is easily observable that there is limited engagement of teenager groups, without the KS5 group having been included. This appears to be a structural problem, with a remarkable lack of offering for a group particularly vulnerable to county lines and exploitation (Jones, 2019). A partial explanation for the situation of summer 2020 is related to the almost inexistent participation of secondary schools in the scheme, and in general lack of secondary school age provision on offer by the rest of providers, but since this is a recurring issue there needs to be a careful consideration of how to involve this age group on activities relevant and engaging for them, in the planning of future support schemes.

On this occasion, it has been possible to collect data about young people declaring to belong to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) groups. As Figure 3 illustrates, Wirral has

almost double the proportion of children in this category (19.9%) taking part in the Holiday programme compared to Halton (10.8%) and more than double of West Cheshire (9.7%).

Figure 3. Proportion of young people in SEND category by area



Source: Edsential

It is not a surprise then that some providers expressed concern about the lack of specific training, or sufficient numbers of staff to cater for the specific needs of this group, particularly in the initial weeks, though they all reported a quick adaptation and good engagement of all children in the activities. This concern came from some providers participating in the summer scheme for the first time, or receiving SEND children for the first time, unfamiliar perhaps with the characteristics of some of the children who signed up for their activities as opposed to those who knew the children from previous years. Many Special Education Centres/Schools had to close during the first lockdown and some continued closed during the summer months, or at least not fully operational, which created difficulties for parents to find more specifically tailored provision.

In terms of the range of provision, 76% was delivered face to face, with 22% of provision consisting on the delivery of food and activity boxes with online support, and only 2% of providers delivering online only. It has already been mentioned that the number of providers increased significantly, and for many this was their first experience participating in holiday provision, while others adapted their provision to the circumstances, and most of them saw considerable increase in the intake of the offering, regardless of the lack of sufficient timing for promotion. Activities offered included different sports (football, rugby, tennis), but also inclusive games, theatre/drama, books, arts and crafts, dance, gardening – grow vegetables, etc. and in terms of packages, the most popular was the food ingredients with recipes to prepare meals at home where all the members of the family could participate. This year there has been proportionally a significant drop in activities focused on delivering nutritional information, with the exception of the calories that different meals would have and alternatives offered in case someone had any food intolerance or allergy. It has been the mission of providers exclusively dedicated to food provision to cover this aspect, with a few

exceptions, as well as the fact that schools include nutritional education in their term provision, so it has not been necessarily a priority during the summer time. It is worth pointing out though that nutritional education activities and information continued with more experienced providers who managed to deliver their offer face to face. Those newer to the scheme or who had to stop the provision of food due to the pandemic tended to rely on whatever was on offer from other partners in charge of food distribution. Some of the new providers have particular areas of expertise not connected to food or nutrition, so it is worth exploring if their offering is or could be complemented by the food and nutritional aspects through other means or is really missing in a particular geographical area.

However, at a moment in time where families had been for weeks under lockdown, it is particularly welcome to see activities focused on homework support, numeracy, mindfulness and wellbeing as part of the provision, since effects on mental health of Covid19 have been significant, as it will be related in subsequent sections.

The following sub-sections will be dedicated to summarise the perceptions of the different participants in the provision throughout the summer of 2020.

Providers and Schools

In previous years the provision of many activities took place in schools. This became an issue this year with the closure of many schools due to Covid19. The ones that remained opened for the children of key workers and other vulnerable children during the first national lockdown were part of the limited possibilities that providers could access to for the summer programme. Providers referred repeatedly the difficulties in contacting schools to be able to organise activities, with some of them having to search for alternative venues at short notice. In general providers also referred challenges to access Local Authorities owned community venues and spaces, which remained closed in the period leading up to the delivery (first lockdown), and many of them stayed closed throughout the summer. Lack of involvement of secondary schools stands out as a negative, as it reduced the availability of activities for this vulnerable age group. Engagement of schools with the provision is considered key, as 26% of parents participating in the research revealed that they heard about the Holiday provision through the schools directly, with social media being the second source of information. It is also worth noticing that access to information online was very limited for a segment of participants (with lack of internet and/or electronic devices), so other means of communication need to be considered.

Covid19 also had a big effect on the provision since very rigorous risk assessments had to be completed, with strict social distancing rules, cleaning and hygiene routines, bubbles with less children interacting in each group, staggered timings, and adaptation of the activities offered. The uncertainty over what could be opened or not, and changes of rules to respond to Covid19, added difficulty to the organisation of the provision. For some providers who traditionally would cook a hot meal onsite, the restrictions and limitations this year meant that no food was provided by them and instead that part had to be taken care of by third parties. For other providers it has meant that the provision took place completely outdoors, using parks instead of indoor spaces.

The range of providers was quite varied across the three geographical areas, with a significant proportion having more than 10 years of experience in delivering different types of activities and support for children and families, including youth clubs, community centres, charities, church groups, physical activity clubs, play centres or holiday clubs. It is interesting that many of the most experienced providers preferred to fill in online questionnaires instead of taking part on live interviews. The number of young people the providers and schools catered for was also quite varied, with some looking after 35-40 young people per week, while others covered between 300 and 600 young people. The ones reaching higher numbers were mostly food and activity packs providers. Some of the providers are traditionally family orientated so they were offering activities for children and parents, as well as joint family activities. It is also worth noticing that some of these providers offer activities throughout the year and not just focused around holiday breaks.

For most providers having to adapt to social distancing rules and modify their provision has been a challenge, and managing this adaptation successfully is seen already as a positive outcome. Some providers have reported higher intake and the ability to reach a wider segment of the population through online activities and delivery of packs, for those who could not reach the delivery venues or those families who feared leaving the house due to Covid19. It is expected that some of the new activities introduced will continue in future years as they had a very positive response.

The main challenges mentioned by most providers were associated with funding, the uncertainty about its continuation in the future to make activities financially viable in the long term, and the confirmation of availability being too rushed to be able to appropriately plan a full range of activities and promote the summer programme intake on time. Continuity of funding would be important to extend the provision to other areas and cover the needs of more young people, bearing in mind the generalised perception that Covid19 will increase the need to support families considerably. Other challenges mentioned refer to the dependence on volunteers, which can be intermittent and in some cases lack longer term commitment to the activities. In that sense, funding to be able to pay specialist staff instead of depending on volunteers was pointed as a challenge by some providers. To a lesser extent, recruitment of young people interested on the scheme was seen as a problem by some of the newest providers, due to having less connections to help with promotion in the local area.

For some providers the participation in the Holiday programme has meant that children entitled to free school meals were given the access to the activities for the first time, and they would like this to be the case in the future. It was also pointed out that the purpose of the scheme should not be only those young people classified under the free school meals umbrella, and flexibility is required to make sure that all vulnerable children are taken care of. With more people affected by redundancies, furlough and generally reduction of family income, in areas already hit by poverty and deprivation, it should be possible for schools to identify those who not being officially under a government support scheme may be struggling and needing help. Providers and schools mentioned the consideration of family indebtedness levels as a possible indicator to facilitate wider participation in the future.

Both schools and providers noticed differences in children with regard to the access to digital tools. Not all schools had access to the government programme that delivered laptops to be distributed among children who didn't have access to online school delivery during the first lockdown. However, those who received some laptops pointed that they arrived only in the last week of school before the summer break and that they were locked by passwords that were not provided until one week later, which rendered them useless for students to catch up on time. Some schools mentioned that they didn't have access to funding due to being considered part of affluent areas, despite having children in need under their care. Other schools mentioned that the provision of laptops was limited to those children in social care, so if someone had not been added to that category there was no offer of support. Schools then had to step up their provision of support during the summer break in an attempt to correct this gap.

Parents

The engagement of parents with the research is particularly welcome. It has revealed more in depth information about the communities where provision has taken place, beyond what could be the perceptions of outsiders. Most of them describe their areas as nice, close and quiet communities, friendly and welcoming, though recognise that some see them as 'rough', and that they are not always safe. Many also acknowledge that there are high levels of poverty and deprivation, and from the family point of view, 'not many things to do', without facilities or activities for young people available. More than 30% of parents responding to the research requests confirmed that their children attended activities onsite (ie. face to face), some of them also complemented with pack deliveries. However it was also noticeable that there was a need to use transport (car) to arrive to delivery venues, as they were relatively far away, and public transport was not an option in many cases. This issue was particularly reported by families without access to a car, who relied on grandparents for the transport of children to the activity venues. This was corroborated by members of the partnership board, who confirmed the limited availability of public transport in some areas. It is worth noticing that many of the parents who responded the online questionnaire reported short distance to the activities venue, being able to access walking. In the context of Covid19, this seems to indicate that access to activities has been hindered this year by access to transport links, insofar due to the vulnerabilities of grandparents and social distancing rules there was less opportunity for some families to count on transport alternatives. This finding is consistent with the situation over the summer of 2019. It is interesting that most parents taking part in live interviews or responding online questionnaires belong to West Cheshire and Halton, with those from the Wirral area opting for paper questionnaires and less engagement with the research in general.

Everyone admitted that Covid19 has impacted their lives in a significant way, with some families directly affected by bereavement, of friends or relatives, but all of them having to adapt to lockdown rules. Some parents said their lives have changed 'forever'. The closure of schools and having to stay at home made children particularly long for going out and do activities outdoors, which made the Holiday programme with face to face delivery especially attractive, as it provided the opportunity to 'leave the house for several hours a day'. Activity kits including balls and outdoor games were also highly valued. A considerable proportion of

parents responding to the research have children belonging to the SEND group, so they valued the possibility to have their children taken care of in a safe environment, while they could dedicate time to take care of other siblings or work from home.

Having to help with home schooling at the same time that they tried to keep on work commitment has been a particular struggle for many parents, with some of them recognising that they were not in the best position to support their children due to their own lack of digital skills and literacy. In that regard some pointed out the help received from specialised providers and schools as a 'life line'.

However some also explained that they didn't receive any specific support from schools other than a phone call to check how they were. For families without access to laptops or other digital devices, some parents pointed that for two weeks they received paper materials but afterwards everything was moved to online delivery so they struggled. Some parents resorted to borrow laptops from relatives or friends, but others saw how their children shared one tablet or mobile phone to try and keep up with lessons. Having access to a laptop through the Holiday scheme was a real game changer.

Part of the difficulties created by Covid19 for families involved the change in the size of the household. With redundancies, closure of schools and universities, families already in low incomes saw how instead of having to provide for three or four people all of a sudden there were seven people or more under the same roof. Parents reported a change in their children behaviour during lockdown. Not only they were bored and wanting to go out and see friends. Some of them became anxious but also defiant or violent, with difficult behaviour which made family life more challenging, and parents reporting high levels of stress. The younger children exhibited confusion and they did not understand why they could not see other family members or their friends, nor why they had to stay at home. Some parents also reported that some of the children had become more quiet and kept to themselves, wanting to isolate, adding a level of worry over their mental health. Participation in the Holiday programme one way or another brought a much welcome change to families' routine, with parents giving very positive feedback for all the activities and centres. In fact, some of the feedback indicated the wish to see the programme to extend its duration for longer hours and more weeks (not all the providers could cover 4 weeks in the same centre). Parents also pointed at some facilities being full and having a waiting list, so bigger facilities were also suggested in order for more children to benefit.

Young people

The effects of Covid19 and lockdown in young people will take time to be properly assessed, as with a second lockdown in place it is expected that impacts will be durable and mostly observable in the medium and long term, particularly with regard to school performance and attainment, even if schools have now remained open. Schools had already observed a gap in attendance and performance on those students belonging to the most disadvantaged groups.

As expected due to the limited provision catering for secondary school age groups, participation in the research has been very low. However some interesting aspects can be pointed out, though they would be non-statistically significant. While staying at home has

been hard and home schooling has been challenging, particularly for those without immediate access to digital devices, for others in this age group staying at home has been positive as 'there is no trouble that I can get into so I have been more productive' or have 'been able to focus more'.

Those who didn't have access to a digital device and received a laptop during the school break were eager to catch up with school work and experienced a great relief as they managed to 'read and see what was actually in the screen', or 'be able to write with a proper keyboard' and 'participate fully'. Situations varied greatly between families, and children of younger ages seemed to be very sensible to the risks of Covid19, especially those considered young carers. Some expressed fear to get out of the house and do shopping in case they would bring the virus home. Some others showed an unusual level of maturity for young ages, pointing out that staying at home allowed them to have more time 'to think what to do with my life'. Several young people who received laptops indicated their wish to pursue higher education and go to university, which had previously been out of their plans. Parents, schools and providers reported higher levels of anxiety in some children, particularly around the idea of going back to school, so the possibility to attend certain activities in school settings contributed positively to children's adaptation to the new school environment.

Primary school age children were more interested in general in enjoying the activities, having missed greatly the opportunity to see friends and other family members during the lockdown. There is no single activity pointed out as favourite, with sports of different varieties being regularly mentioned, drama, painting, crafts and cooking, the latter being mentioned by all age groups and geographical areas.

In terms of nutritional education, most young people recognise the need to include fruits and vegetables in their diets, however when asked about favourite food, the most repeated answer keeps being pizza, followed by pasta, with snacks (kit kat in particular) and curries regularly mentioned. It is not surprising then that when asked about their favourite activity during the summer holiday provision, common answers were cooking of cheesecake and chocolate cake. Only one child mentioned 'fruit kebabs' as a favourite. Parents in that sense confirm their attempts to provide a balanced diet, though it is difficult to change children preferences, particularly of those who declare themselves fussy eaters.

Impact assessment of the Holiday provision

The summer 2020 provision cannot be fully compared to previous years insofar the restrictions created by the Covid19 pandemic have affected the normal functioning of providers, with added uncertainty about the availability of venues and feasibility of some activities under Covid-safe rules.

It is however indisputable that activities are overwhelmingly welcome as an added and much needed service for deprived communities. This research has also tried to assess the provision of food, reaching the conclusion that councils, schools and providers, in collaboration with food retailers and volunteers have come together to ensure that there was sufficient food

available in the worst affected communities. This has made that in the local areas under study it has not been perceived an increase in the use of food banks, as it has happened in other areas of the country, as provision has been enough and distribution of food packages has worked successfully. The interview process however revealed that though collaboration with food banks had been great, at times contacting them had been difficult, reflecting how busy they have been throughout the period. In fact, data from West Cheshire Food Bank indicates an increase in the number of food vouchers used during the period. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of food vouchers used. Comparison 2019-2020 (West Cheshire Food Bank)

	2019	2020
March to November	6792	8372
July & August	1359	1699

Source: West Cheshire Food Bank

These figures indicate an increase in demand (despite a perception on the contrary) prompted by the economic insecurity created by the pandemic, which is likely to continue for a number of years, as indicated by the Spending Review 2020 speech (HM Treasury, 2020).

The economic situation had deteriorated in some of the areas before the pandemic, so there was already a number of ‘social supermarkets’ and ‘community supermarkets’ operating in some neighbourhoods, and some more have opened during the first lockdown. As a direct consequence of the programme, Edsential set up a meeting with Feeding Britain and Halton. Feeding Halton has now been established and Ditton Social Supermarket in Halton is in the process of being set up. The delivery of food packages really covered a social need, with some families not being able to leave the house due to shielding, some reporting that by the time they could get to their local supermarket or convenience store the shelves were already empty, and some not having access to transport to carry family shopping. Some families, schools and providers reported difficulties to access food vouchers, hence the decision to focus the provision on the delivery of food packages.

Having access to activities after a period of lockdown seems to have ensured even more positive effects this year. Some teenagers have described them directly as ‘an escape’, while parents specifically value the positive impact in the mental health of children, which had deteriorated during the lockdown. Children appeared happier and with a more positive attitude and behaviour at home, more calmed, tired after physical exercise, and willing to try both new activities and new food types. For many cooking together following the recipes provided online, and sharing photos of their achievements has been a highlight of the summer. In general, it can be argued that providers have shown innovation and creativity to think of ways to get children engaged in a challenging environment, but also to keep parents engaged, and they remark the importance of parents’ involvement for long lasting effects. Many parents valued positively doing more things together as a family, as a direct result of taking part in the Holiday programme, and both parents and providers stated the role of the provision on ‘creating family memories’. While in previous years there could be a perception of activities tailored for boys and girls as separated groups, this year the provision has taken a much more inclusive and integrative approach, with varieties appealing to all groups indistinctively. Additionally, even if the purpose of the provision is to support young people,

it is clear that it has a positive influence in families and communities as a whole. The pandemic has highlighted the need for wider support targeting parents, which some providers are already addressing through parenting skills sessions. However some parents themselves recognised their limitations to support their children, particularly with schooling, due to their own low levels of literacy, with some admitting difficulties to perform certain basic digital tasks such as sending an email. Schools observed also difficulties in this regard, in some cases to be added to language barriers in some communities.

Providers also observed positive changes in young people from the beginning of the activities to the end, with particularly good outcomes with regard to self-confidence and resilience. The development of social skills, even in socially distance settings, was also perceived, with children belonging to SEND groups managing to integrate themselves and enjoy with others. Leadership skills were part of the goals of some providers, but were also observed by those who have been running activities for several years, with children who have previously attended helping younger children and acting as role models. Those who provided food onsite particularly observed the willingness of children to try new types of food, being surprised by some situations in which 'some children didn't even know what a jacket potato was'.

One of the gaps of the provision is the availability of opportunities for young people over 12 years old. When interviewed, this group could not give specific examples of what type of activities they would feel interested on participating, only mentioning the possibility to meet new people and socialise. The younger age groups did provide some suggestions for activities that could be included in future provision, such as music related ones, movies, or day trips to have a change of scenery. The latter were part of the offering of some providers in previous years, but have not been possible in 2020 due to Covid19 restrictions. Other suggestions, which show the different provisions available, include football, volleyball, gymnastics, tennis, a talent show, art work or a pet day (bring pets from home).

The summer provision contributed to break the feeling of isolation brought by the lockdown, with those who received activity and food packages still missing the social component and wanting to meet more people and make new friends. However they also showed good level of understanding of the situation and the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

Evaluation of the Partnership Boards

The perceptions about the functioning of the partnership boards have been generally positive, though with room for improvement. It can be argued that meetings were well organised, the decision making process for the allocation of funding to different providers was smooth, and there was an added value to count on members representing a diverse group of stakeholders, with some members welcoming in particular the participation of people with experience in food poverty.

There were questions raised however with regard to the profile of some members, insofar they may not have a sufficient authoritative role within their institution to promote change and 'make things happen'. It was also observed by the researchers that some members saw

their role in the partnership board as temporary or a secondment, not being part of their main duties. Some also mentioned that they only participated at a very early stage so they really didn't have a deep knowledge about what the partnership was trying to achieve. This was also perceived by some of the area coordinators. It became apparent that a higher level of commitment from the participants was necessary, and for a longer period of time. Better understanding of the purpose of the scheme and its evaluation is required.

It was also observable that there were big differences in the expertise of the members, with some involved in activities related to public health, nutrition, food poverty or deprivation for many years, while for others, in particular area coordinators, this was the first time they entered in contact with the reality of the acute needs in their communities. For the latter it was a learning curve to be aware of how extended issues of food poverty are within their local area, as the external perception is, particularly in West Cheshire and some parts of the Wirral, of a predominantly affluent community.

The lack of understanding and commitment on some members led to delays in some decision making process in relation to the commissioning of providers, but particularly with regard to delivery of documentation, collection of information and meeting of deadlines for paperwork completion. Recommendations in the next section will aim to address some of these issues. In this regard, some members also suggested widening the participation on the partnership boards to include academia.

The participation of representatives with different backgrounds and from diverse stakeholder groups was considered positive in order to learn from best practices in other communities. It also opens the possibility of future collaborations.

Conclusions and recommendations

The provision of activities and food during the summer school break constitutes without a doubt a positive intervention in communities suffering from low income and high levels of poverty and deprivation. The summer of 2020, under Covid19 restrictions and negative economic impacts, has exacerbated the inequalities existing in those communities, making more evident the gaps in access to services, education and digital facilities.

There is increasing demand in all the areas under analysis to provide both food and activities during all school breaks and not only during the summer, though it is recognised that the summer break is the most significant period due to its long duration.

Results indicate positive changes in children and the wider families, particularly in self-confidence and sense of happiness, improvement of mood and behaviour at home. Providers and schools value the role of the Holiday scheme as a measure that prevents anti-social behaviours in their respective communities. In this regard, the positive contribution of the programme on young people's mental health is especially recognised.

However, in order to fully assess the impact of the programme in the longer term, there is a need to evaluate children's evolution during school term, to see if the gaps in attendance,

attainment and performance of those in the most vulnerable groups starts narrowing. In order for that to happen, full participation of schools in research is required and a longitudinal study needs to be conducted. The inclusion of activities for young people over 12 years old is a very limited element of the provision, despite the fact that some providers cater for siblings on mixed ages, but usually they don't have participants over the age of 14, unless their overall aim includes support and activities for families as a whole. It is imperative that secondary schools get involved in this process, and as such allocated the necessary resources. The programme needs further engagement with young people in this age group to identify which activities need to be offered going forward, in order to ensure their engagement. It is also recommended that the partnership board remains open to allow new providers to participate, as there is clearly a gap in the provision that current providers can offer. In that sense, it could be desirable to add members of secondary schools, academies and colleges to the partnership boards.

The research has also revealed that the situation of many young people who require support is linked to wider family needs, so it is recommended that interventions include initiatives to support the parents, particularly with regard to literacy (general and digital).

It is also recommended to draw up clear terms of reference for the members of the partnership boards, to ensure their role, responsibilities and commitment are clearly understood. Bearing in mind the need to continue with this provision, the assessment of its effectiveness is also required. In this sense, early action should be taken, with clear organisation and structured planning, and with terms of reference that commit participants to research. It is also recommended to allow researchers early contact with partnership boards, area coordinators and providers, so that the relevance of the evaluation, monitoring and research by an independent party is fully understood and supported throughout.

The government has now approved a Covid Winter Grant Scheme with part of its funding, allocated through local authorities, dedicated to cover food and bills of the most vulnerable during the pandemic (Cowen, 2020). It has also been announced the commitment of the government to make funding available for Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) provision through Easter, Summer and Christmas in 2021 (Cowen, 2020). This approach is in line with the demand expressed by participants in the existing schemes, and the recommendations of this and previous research (Francis et al. 2019). It should provide an opportunity for better planning and promotion of activities. HAF would benefit from a longer term funding guarantee to allow providers to plan, grow and develop in meeting the needs of the growing FSM eligible children and young people population. The funding security would help build sustainability and ensure providers meet all quality standards. Given the wider needs created by the pandemic, with more families struggling but children not officially classified as FSM eligible, flexibility to access the participation in HAF activities is key to ensure that no vulnerable child is excluded, and that families in need receive support before they reach a crisis point from which is more difficult to recover.

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