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The Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF): Improving Children's Diet and Physical Activity Across the School Holidays.

Northumbria University's Healthy Living Lab is one of the leading research groups in the UK focussing on issues relating to children's health and wellbeing, and food insecurity in under-represented individuals and communities. Areas of focus include school breakfast clubs, school meals, and holiday activities and food programmes. The lab brings together academics from across multiple disciplines to inform and evaluate school and community interventions and to inform practice and policy. The Lab specialises in co-designing research projects, interventions and policies with stakeholders and user groups, especially children and young people, and uses a variety of methods to capture the voices of children and young people.

Summary

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme is a national school holiday programme in England, funded by the Department for Education (DfE). Following the success of smaller scale pilot programmes, in 2021 the DfE funded HAF at £220M per annum for three financial years, allowing for the expansion of HAF to all 152 upper-tier local authorities in England. HAF is primarily for children who receive means-tested free school meals during school term-time, although local authorities can use up to 15% of their allocated HAF funding to provide free or subsidised places to children who are not in receipt of means-tested free school meals during term-time but may benefit from attendance (1). In each local authority, HAF is primarily delivered via VCS organisations and schools. Nationally, HAF reaches a significant number of children and young people, with recent data showing that almost three-quarters of a million children attended HAF during summer 2021 (2).

To ensure minimum quality standards across HAF clubs, the DfE disseminates updated and regulated guidance to all upper-tier local authorities and HAF providers, which includes a quality standards framework and stipulates the programme aims and mandatory components which must be delivered. Each local authority is expected to offer the equivalent of six weeks of HAF provision annually, including at least four days during the Easter and Christmas holidays, and 16 days during the summer. However, within reason, local authorities have

flexibility to create their own expectations regarding HAF delivery, based upon how long each school holiday period lasts within their area. Moreover, clubs must: provide at least one meal per day which meets School Food Standards and considers allergies and cultural requirements; provide fun and enriching activities which allow children to develop new skills or knowledge and try out new experiences; provide physical activity opportunities and meet the 'Physical Activities Guidelines' each day; increase awareness of healthy eating, healthy lifestyles and positive behaviours through nutritional and health-related education; signpost and refer families to relevant services; and, follow and implement the relevant policies and procedures regarding safeguarding, health and safety, insurance, accessibility and inclusivity (1).

The need for HAF programmes to align with School Food Standards and GMO guidelines on physical activity means that all future offerings are legally obliged to meet minimum nutritional quality and physical activity standards. Embedding positive healthy behaviours in children from low-income households would appear to be crucial to escape the current intergenerational lifestyle and excess body weight cycle that the UK currently finds itself stuck in, and hence increase human capital whilst reducing the burden on the NHS.

Background

At a global level, excess body weight is a key independent risk factor for early death and loss of healthy life years (3). The largest modifiable risk factor linked not only to overweight and obesity but also to all-cause morbidity and mortality globally is poor diet (4). The major impacts of poor diet on future disease risk appear to largely relate to cardiovascular risk. Individual dietary factors that appear most impactful that align with UK guidelines and proposed national targets for behaviour improvement are: (i) Low intake of food sources of fibre (whole grains, fruits, vegetables, pulses, beans, nuts and similar), (ii) Excess intake of sodium/salt (5).

In England, alarming national figures highlight that prevalence of obesity more than doubles from reception age (9.2% of children) to reception age (22.7% of children). Just over a quarter of all adults in England are obese (and 64% who are overweight or obese). These figures underline the national challenge of excess body weight. National data also highlight clear differences in health outcomes of those who are overweight or obese versus those that maintain a recommended body weight status. (6, 7). Excess body weight is estimated to cost the UK at least £27 billion per year (8) in healthcare and wider societal costs and could be over double this figure (9).

Excess body weight status also appears to be strongly associated with socio-economic position, and household food insecurity. Those from the most deprived decile in the UK/England have mortality rates twice as high as the least deprived (10) and have considerably more likely to be overweight and obese (72% vs 58% respectively) (11). The number of households experiencing food insecurity is also startling (12). At national levels, dietary habit in adults and children do not meet the recommendations. Previous estimates suggest that fewer than 1 in 1000 people follow all aspects of dietary guidelines (13). Data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey in England highlight worse intake of fruits, vegetables, fibre and salt in individuals from lower household incomes (14). Taken together, these findings highlight that:

1. Excess body weight is now the national norm rather than the exception.
2. Obesity is more common in those of lower socio-economic position.
3. National excess body weight has economic and societal impacts that are avoidable.

Diet: Cooking Skills and Health Outcomes

The UK diet is constantly changing, driven by consumer preference, policy and external global factors impacting the food supply chain (e.g. pandemics and global conflicts). Ensuring that positive dietary habits like those in the Eatwell guidelines are operationally and culturally-embedded is important to change the current national “junk food cycle” (6). Delivering positive food offerings and further support in making positive lifelong dietary choices is crucial to this, particularly in populations at high risk of poor dietary habit and future, avoidable disease. The HAF framework already notes the need to include nutritional education as part of club offerings (15), and some clubs provide opportunities to engage children, young people, and parents in hands-on-cooking opportunities (i.e. a programme in which families can improve their cooking/food-provisioning skills together). Previous findings suggest improving cooking and food preparation skills can positively impact dietary habit, such as increasing fruit and vegetable consumption (16, 17).

This paper presents findings on the Department for Education’s Holiday Activities and Food programme that show that HAF plays a crucial role in improving children’s and young people’s dietary habit through food, engagement in physical activity, and knowledge about health and nutrition. We argue that it is imperative that the funding for this vital programme continues post March 2025.

The Holiday Activity and Food Programme

The Healthy Living Labs at Northumbria University have been involved in research on holiday clubs for over ten years, including advising on the design of and initial evaluations of HAF (18). Holiday clubs have been developed as a means of providing enriching activities and free-school meal equivalents outside of school term-time for 5-16-year-olds. Importantly, these clubs are targeted at supporting those children in receipt of free school meals and normally located in underserved areas. As such, they represent a rational means of improving dietary behaviours in a target population at risk of both health inequalities and imprudent dietary habit, improving engagement in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and knowledge on healthy behaviours. HAF and programmes such as, 'Kitchen Social', funded by the Mayor's Fund for London have been evidenced to improve wider societal benefit beyond improving physical activity levels and dietary intake in attendees (19-30).

Importantly, the overall societal return on investment of investment on HAF programmes has estimated to be over ten-fold (31), a return that is higher than many public health and nutrition-based interventions. The economic and societal benefits of HAF investment in children and young people are therefore unquestionable.

For the purpose of the current Call for Evidence on "Diet, Food and Obesity", we will focus on the most direct and pertinent information currently available on HAF and community organisations providing activities across the school holidays.

Holiday clubs and dietary behaviour

From a food perspective, HAF clubs are required to follow School Food Standards (32), while Non-HAF funded clubs do not have to need to adhere to these criteria, but often elect to (33). Our previous findings highlight that adherence to national (Eatwell) guidelines (34) is improved for children on holiday club attendance days versus days they do not attend (32). These findings relate to the whole day of dietary habit rather than just foods consumed at the club, highlighting the impact on immediate improvement in dietary behaviour across the whole day. Findings from our evaluation of HAF programmes highlight that on average clubs meet the majority (c.70%) of School Foods Standards. These findings underline that the HAF programme provides a means to improve children's and young people's dietary behaviour and embed a more positive food culture in attendees from lower-income households.

Holiday clubs improve body weight status

We are not aware of direct evidence that would suggest that HAF attendance has a measurement impact of fatness or prevalence of excess body weight. Recent studies in Australia have highlighted the school vacations as a time in which children may increase body fatness (35), likely due to a change in diet and physical activity routines. Modelling of the impact of HAF programmes within the Healthy Living Lab suggests that there is an almost two-fold social return on investment through costs saved as a result of limiting childhood obesity alone (31).

HAF Plus.

HAF Plus is a HAF programme co-designed with 13–16-year-olds and key stakeholders to meet the needs of this age group of young people (36). Importantly, young people wanted a programme that was not only fun but incorporated opportunities for skill development and work-based opportunities. Following a series of local and national design sprints led by the Healthy Living Lab, local authorities continue to a) involve young people in the implementation and evaluation of their HAF Plus programme, b) ensure young people are represented on HAF Plus steering groups, c) adopt new ways of working, and c) aligning and embedding HAF Plus within wider programmes and initiatives (e.g. free transport for all young people attending HAF Plus in Gateshead). Following successful pilots in Gateshead, Northumberland, Birmingham and London via Kitchen Social, this programme is now being scaled up and rolled out across additional local authorities and is attracting significant interest from cultural venues, businesses and universities.

Recommendations

HAF programmes can improve dietary habit in attendees short-term (i.e. over 1-3 months) but have a wider potential to embed positive dietary choice throughout the life course in children and young people from lower-income households. HAF programmes represent a targeted means of improving behaviours and food security in a cost-effective manner but will not change national dietary behaviour or health outcomes alone without wider public health interventions. We make the follow key recommendations based on the above evidence.

1. A minimum three-year funding settlement in the next spending review which reflects the increased numbers of eligible children, as well as the increased per-child costs of delivering the programme

2. A framework for 'HAF Plus' implementation to ensure 13-16 year-olds can access a bespoke, co-designed offer that meets their needs and preferences

3. Greater flexibility around eligibility for places on the HAF programme, with a particular focus on ensuring all children and young people living in poverty can access the programme

4. A partnership board with UK-wide businesses in the retail, hospitality, sports, and creative sectors to leverage in their support for the programme

26 March 2024

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