

Improve holiday club accessibility for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

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About the research

Children with SEND, particularly those from families with low-income, experience inequities across educational and health outcomes. The school holidays are difficult for families with low-income, prompting UK government programmes including the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) clubs. Little is known about how inclusive these holiday clubs are for children with SEND, despite this being a group who may particularly benefit.

HAF programme evaluations have reported several positive outcomes. HAF clubs can increase physical activity, children's confidence, prevent social isolation and keep children from participating in anti-social behaviour. Furthermore, parents/carers of HAF programme attendees report that the free activities and food bring financial relief. However, there is sparse evidence for how equitable these outcomes are.

Those delivering HAF acknowledge that children with SEND are likely to experience inequities in access to and their experience of holiday clubs. In response, a Toolkit was developed by the Council for Disabled Children (CDC) intended to equip Local Authority holiday club coordinators and providers to support involvement of children with SEND in their local area. The Toolkit reports barriers to participation and offers information and tools to support delivery.

As part of a larger project on HAF, we spoke to those involved in the delivery of the HAF programme (n=28) and parents (n=32). Using interviews and focus groups we aimed to understand the challenges and opportunities for the promotion of inclusive and accessible school holiday provision for children with SEND.

Policy recommendations

- Policymakers such as the Department for Education should allocate additional funds for providers who make SEND adjustments and organise transport.
- Local Authorities should provide training as standard for club staff on supporting children with SEND. This offer may include collaborating with expert organisations as well as involving parents of children with SEND to volunteer at the clubs to support capacity.
- Holiday clubs should use a framework for engaging with families to understand their child's level of need and which clubs they could attend.
- Communications and booking forms should use supportive language to enable families to feel confident to disclose their child's needs, with assurances that disclosure will not lead to exclusion.
- Special schools could support 'mainstream' provision through signposting families to inclusive clubs, advising on food and activities, and providing food for clubs. School staff could also support delivery at 'mainstream' clubs.
- Local Authorities should facilitate opportunities for holiday club providers to link with special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) in local schools to advertise the programme.

Key findings

- There is **restricted funding** for the programme as a whole and limited funding for provision for children with SEND, which costs more.
- **Transport is a particular challenge** for the clubs more broadly, but especially for children with SEND who may not be able to use public transport or have access to a vehicle.
- Many 'mainstream' clubs find it difficult to meet the needs of children with SEND. This is due to the increasing proportion of children with SEND and the diverse level of need. The aim to include children with SEND, rather than segregate, requires **additional resources and training**, including in **how to support children with SEND without stigmatising**.
- There is a challenge with families **not declaring their child's needs to clubs** due to: a lack of official diagnosis or clear understanding of the child's need; stigma around the child's condition preventing disclosure; the lack of any activities for the child to do during the holidays driving parents not to disclose SEND and hope the club would accommodate on the day; and advertising of the club suggesting inclusivity, meaning parents did not feel they had to disclose their child's needs.
- Some HAF clubs declare to be inclusive and accessible, but then are **not actually equipped** when families arrive.
- There is a specific difficulty in providing **food suitable for children with SEND** within the context of holiday club provision, while also meeting School Food Standards and with a limited budget.

Recommendations for the HAF Toolkit

- Implementation of a grading system to indicate the level of inclusivity and accessibility of each club to families. This resource could be a useful addition to the Toolkit, as a comprehensive and standardised method to share club inclusivity information with families.
- Example approaches for seeking additional funding such as from private and third sector organisations, to support provision for children with SEND.
- Offering case studies of how volunteering, work experience and basic wage upskilling opportunities could increase club staff capacity, such as for student occupational therapists, speech and language therapists or nurses.
- A section on food provision, with specific recommendations on developing menus and involving children in food preparation.

Further information

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