

Briefing

The need for summer scheme support in response to Covid-19

June 2020

When considering summer schemes, we need to remember the unprecedented impact on children's education wrought by Covid-19.

In a normal week, almost 10 million children in England would be at nursery, school or college. In the week commencing 18th May it was just 240,000 children a day¹ – 2.4% of those who would usually attend. Government have since extended the offer of school places to 3 year groups, and one quarter of year 10s can join them from mid-June. This very cautious approach contrasts to Wales (where all children will return to school before the summer holidays), as well as Belgium, the Netherlands and France which re-opened school for all children several weeks ago. This will mean most children in England will have missed the best part of six months of formal education, the biggest disruption since the Second World War. During this time, there will have been massive variation in the amount of education different children have received and the amount of learning they will have been able to undertake.

We know that time out of the classroom affects all children, but disadvantaged children much more significantly. Previous research has suggested that up to two thirds of the gap between economically disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers is accounted for by the six-week summer holidays². This is a period when no children are undertaking formal education, but where gaps still emerge in children's skills and abilities. School buildings have been closed to most pupils for over two months now and many pupils will not be physically returning until September – making this a six month gap. Even then, it is not confirmed schools will return full time, and further spikes may lead to more school closures.

The Children's Commissioner is concerned that the wider impact on children of school closures is not being given enough attention. As well as losing out on formal academic learning, children are losing the ability to learn: the social, emotional and cognitive skills.

Schools do much more than impart knowledge. They are the environment in which children develop the skills to learn, interpret and socialise. This includes the ability to sit still and concentrate for extended periods; the ability to socialise with peers and adults and to control emotions while doing so; the ability to follow instruction and the ability to think creatively and confidently.

These things do not come from textbooks or online tutorials; they are skills imparted in the classroom by teachers and learnt while playing with other children in the playground. Some children will receive similar stimulation and support in the home environment, yet we know this is hugely variable. For example, a survey of over 4,000 parents in England by the IFS shows that children from better-off households have been spending 30% more time each day on educational activities than children from the poorest fifth of households.³

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings>

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0907568218779130>

³ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848>

Just as we think about how we need to give children learning materials at home, we also need to consider:

1. The impact that school closures are having on children's ability to engage with education
2. The non-educational benefits children receive from school, including social and emotional skills and physical activity.

These factors are particularly important in the early years and when we are considering whether children are "school-ready". Skills from socialisation to concentration are developed in nurseries and other early years settings which are every bit as important as those taught in the classroom. The summer holidays provide an ideal opportunity to re-engage children.

The summer holidays present an opportunity to engage children who have not had access to a stimulating home environment during lockdown and who risk this being compounded by the long summer break. This is as much about providing children with an active and social environment, to prepare them socially and emotionally for returning to the classroom, as it is about formal learning. The Children's Commissioner wants to see central Government supporting holiday provision to address gaps beyond academic ability – fitness, social skills, mental health, cultural capital and so on. Focusing on this now would help facilitate children's return to school in September. Keeping children active and socialising are particularly important: the fitness of children from low-income families falls 18 times faster than their more affluent peers during the summer holidays (ukactive⁴).

Where summer schemes are established, it is very possible to weave in some academic catch-up (many summer schemes already do this), but we should not be thinking about this as six weeks of extra school. Access to school facilities is crucial for such schemes as this is where the local facilities are located, and would make it easier to connect activities, provision of meals and learning.

There is a lot of will out there – but we need a decision soon.

While there is no national summer school programme, many schools, charities and voluntary sector organisations already run summer schemes. Most of the schools that the Children's Commissioner's office have consulted recently either do run summer schools, used to run summer schemes (but stopped for financial reasons) or would like to, if they had the funding.

In addition, there are a whole range of charities and voluntary sector bodies who run such schemes. ukactive is the clearest example; they have numerous members delivering all types of holiday provision. However, even for existing schemes to be able to operate this summer they need to be given the green-light soon in order to recruit staff, secure premises and encourage children to attend. Since existing schemes often rely on parents for funding and demand is likely to be lower this year, additional financial help will be required even to match last year's provision.

Given that the Government have already allowed shops to re-open, and are set to re-open pubs hotels and even theme parks, we are concerned that summer schemes, sports, youth clubs and activity sessions appear to have been neglected. It is not clear why children can spend the day browsing Primark, or going to Thorpe Park, but not attending school or other structured activities.

⁴ <https://www.ukactive.com/news/ukactive-calls-for-government-to-stop-disadvantaged-children-being-left-behind-by-summer-holiday-lockout/>

There is a large potential staff pool for these schemes, but again we need at least a few weeks to get them in place. Sports coaches, supply teachers, youth workers, international summer school staff and trainee teachers who have found themselves out of work/placements because of Coronavirus are all possible options. Moreover, there are numerous schemes which recruit students to work with children, such as The Tutor Trust, which has a proven training mechanism for undergraduates, with outstanding results⁵. They are one of many charities very eager to contribute to the running of summer schools, but need funding to do so.

What do we need from Government?

Firstly, we need a clear signal from Government that the schemes could and should go ahead. At the moment, the Department for Education have not outlined any further plans for schools re-opening beyond years 10 and 12 returning in mid-June. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer has consistently been clear that outside activities pose less risk, and this guidance should inform a sensible approach to enabling these activities to re-start. If schools cannot be open for these schemes over the summer, it seems highly improbable that they could re-open in September. The Government needs to demonstrate its commitment to summer schemes as soon as possible to let schools and the voluntary sector start planning. This should include a strong encouragement for schools to facilitate these schemes wherever possible and to make their premises available to the voluntary sector to run these schemes at cost. Schools must not shoulder this burden alone, local authorities should be working with schools to put on this provision, as should Regional Schools Commissioner (RSCs). RSCs and their react teams should be ensuring adequate provision regionally.

Secondly, we need Government funding to support the costs of these schemes. This could form part of the 'catch-up premium' being championed by members of the Commons Education Select Committee, and supported by charities and research bodies such as the Sutton Trust⁶. The Children's Commissioner's Office has not devised a figure as to how much this would cost because it is not possible within the time to roll-out a standardised national programme. Instead, we want to see the Government supporting the range of provision that schools and the voluntary sector are able to provide. As a guide, last year the Department for Education provided £9.1m to provide summer schemes for 50,000 children, at a cost of £182 per child⁷. The Children's Commissioner wants to see the Government make funding available to support local-level provision of summer schools. When considering the possible costs of this, we believe it needs to be considered in the context of England's overall education budget (£91bn⁸ pa) and the Government's total response to Covid 19 – currently estimated at £132bn⁹.

⁵ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/tutor-trust-effectiveness-trial/>

⁶ <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/200531-Sutton-Trust-response-to-Education-Select-Committee-inquiry-into-Covid-19-impact.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-meals-and-activities-for-50000-children-over-2019-summer-holidays>

⁸ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14369>

⁹ <https://obr.uk/coronavirus-analysis/>