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THE COST OF THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS: Executive summary

Meeting the needs of low income families during holidays

While many children eagerly anticipate the school holidays, families on low incomes face additional financial pressures over the holiday period and can find it challenging to occupy their children on a tight budget and to source appropriate childcare when working. The Cost of the School Holidays study was designed to inform a Glasgow Life feasibility study exploring ways in which holiday provision could better meet the needs of families living in poverty and ensure uptake by children and young people from low income households.

1. Background

Cost of the School Holidays aimed to answer the following questions:

1. *What are school holidays like for low-income families in Glasgow and what does this mean for children and young people's holiday activities?* Establishing key costs and pressures for low-income families in Glasgow during holiday periods and the ways in which this affects children and young people's holiday activities
2. *How does current holiday provision fit with the realities of low income families' school holidays?* Identifying how holiday provision in the city is used and perceived by families and barriers which exist to accessing services
3. *How can holiday service providers across the city better meet the needs of low-income families?* Establishing what would exist in Glasgow over the holiday period if services were designed to alleviate costs and pressures experienced by families on low incomes, to fit with their needs and ensure that low income children and young people were using them.

Six focus groups with parents and three focus groups with children were held to explore these questions. Focus groups were complemented by two surveys, one completed by 223 parents living in Glasgow and the other by 59 organisations working with children and families in the city.

2. What are the challenges facing families on low incomes during the school holidays?

- *Cost pressures over the holiday period:* feeding children outwith term time, particularly for those families receiving free school meals, puts considerable strain on budgets. Many parents report falling into debt or borrowing money to pay for heating, eating, summer clothing and uniform for new school terms
- *Difficulties in sourcing and providing childcare:* for working parents, sourcing local, affordable childcare which fits with their working hours is difficult and many have to alternate their annual leave, reduce working hours or rely on family support. Non-working parents receiving Job Seeker's Allowance must continue to actively seek work and sign on at the Job Centre accompanied by their children. Non-working parents can feel emotional pressure providing 24/7 care for their child during a period when support from voluntary sector parent groups is reduced or withdrawn
- *Emotional pressures:* children can expect to have the same holiday experiences, toys, trips and memories as their peers. Parents feel guilty when they are unable to provide this, particularly lone parents or those without the support of friends or family networks. Working parents depending on grandparents for childcare feel a sense of indebtedness and guilt at missing out on spending time with their children. Isolation, intense financial pressure and lack of emotional support are issues which appear to be particularly significant for lone parent families.

3. Barriers to accessing current holiday provision in Glasgow

Financial barriers

- Costs for holiday activities are unmanageable for some families. The need for advance payment and block booking for some activities makes them even more unaffordable, particularly for families with more than one child
- Additional hidden costs for snacks, equipment or clothing and the cost of transport to get to activities further restricts access
- High costs for childcare and oversubscribed Out of School Care services mean that working parents must save well in advance of the school holidays to fund their child's attendance.

Availability and awareness of provision

- Parents lack timely information about free or low cost activities in advance of the school holidays and have limited awareness of what activities are available, where to find out about them and how to engage in them
- Existing holiday service provision appears to be distributed unevenly across the city with fewer facilities in the north of Glasgow
- There are lengthy waiting lists for Out of School Care services and, again, services are not available in all areas of Glasgow.

Type of provision

- Age-appropriate activities are difficult to find for families with teenagers and pre-school children
- Many activities are not appropriate for children with Additional Support Needs (ASNs) to participate in either with other children with ASNs and/or siblings without ASNs
- Timings of holiday activities do not mimic the working day and it can prove impossible for working parents to drop children off or pick them up
- Access to parks, libraries and museums and galleries across the city can be affected by transport costs, perceptions regarding how welcoming the spaces are and whether they are worth going back to more than once.

Personal barriers

- Lack of personal confidence stops some parents from accompanying their child to new activities or taking their children themselves on trips to unfamiliar destinations.

Limited participation in holiday activities means that some children spend holidays online, watching television or playing computer games. Some parents reported concerns that their child had forgotten what they had previously learned upon their return to school after summer holidays.

4. How can holiday service providers across the city better meet the needs of low-income families?

Parents, children and professionals working with families on low incomes suggested ways in which current barriers to accessing holiday provision could be overcome. It is vital that these barriers and solutions help to inform future developments in holiday provision.

Better planning and promotion of services

- Work with a range of professionals across the city to raise the profile of Glasgow Life and its holiday provision
- Improve partnership working between Glasgow Life and local groups and services
- Address lack of local facilities in some areas and consequent transport cost to venues elsewhere through using dormant school facilities.

Supporting parents' childcare needs

- Address unsuitable timings for holiday activities which do not fit with working hours
- Address lack and affordability of childcare and Out of School Care provision across the city.

Improving access and participation

- Address the issue of 'holiday hunger' by offering free, healthy lunches within existing provision. Learning should be taken from existing schemes in other local authority areas
- Address lengthy waiting lists for holiday provision
- Address barriers to participation caused by the requirement for block-booking, advance payment and face-to-face booking

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- Ensure holiday provision is promoted far in advance to support family planning and budgeting for holiday activities
- Address the issue of transport costs to access holiday provision through the provision of holiday travel passes.

Adapting content and delivery

- Ensure co-design of services with local people
- Ensure support for parents over holiday periods via provision for children
- Provide day trips and visits for children and young people
- Diversify services and activities to serve all ages, including pre 5s and over 12s
- Diversify content to appeal to different children and young people
- Improve provision for children with ASNs
- Address barriers to use of free libraries, parks and museums and galleries in the city

5. Conclusions

Families on low incomes experience a range of challenges during holiday periods, including financial pressures and difficulties in sourcing childcare or holiday activities which are accessible, affordable and fit with parental employment and the needs of the family. This can lead to practical and emotional difficulties for parents and less likelihood that children and young people from low income households access stimulating, enjoyable and beneficial experiences throughout the holidays.

Parents, children and the organisations working with them have highlighted a range of barriers to the uptake of holiday provision in the city and a range of potential solutions to these problems. If taken on board these could help transform Glasgow's holiday provision to better serve the needs of low income families. Awareness of parents' and children's experiences during holidays, the current factors hindering their participation and the potential solutions they propose must all inform the next stage of Glasgow Life's feasibility study.

Access more information about holiday experiences and the solutions low income families would like to see in the full Cost of the School Holidays report: www.cpag.org.uk/costoftheschoolholidays

This report was written by Deborah Butcher, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland.
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