

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Thursday 5 October 2017

1. QUESTION FROM ALDERMAN SPENCE Re: Free School Meals and School Holidays

On Thursday 11 December 2014, I asked Cllr. McInnes the following question about free school meals and the summer holidays: "In view of the recent reports showing that children receiving free school meals were increasingly at risk of food hunger during school holidays, particularly the long summer break, is the County Council investigating how meals for children in need in Devon could be provided during holiday periods?" This was followed up with a survey of Devon schools and in Exeter the beginning of the "Summer Cookery" scheme.

Can Cllr. McInnes report on the current situation and what action is being taken to promote holiday projects and breakfast clubs in Devon schools? Can Cllr. Leadbetter tell us of any action being undertaken by Public Health to address this problem highlighted once again by this summer's report on hunger by the All Party Parliamentary Group chaired by Frank Field? He tells us:

"Up to 3 million children risk going hungry during the school holidays, leaving them vulnerable to malnutrition and undermining their education and life chances, a cross-party group of MPs and peers has warned. Its report cited evidence of children existing on holiday diets of crisps, hungry youngsters unable to take part in a football tournament because "their bodies simply gave up", and others surviving on stodgy, unhealthy diets "bought to fill hungry stomachs"."

The report said those at risk of hunger over the summer include more than 1 million children who receive free school meals during term time, and 2 million more with working parents who are still in poverty. "The evidence presented in this report is staggering. It shows us that not only are there children in this country who are exposed to hunger when they are not at school, but also that this exposure risks damaging their prospects of gaining a good education and living a healthy life," the group's chair, Frank Field MP, said. The all-party parliamentary group (AG) on hunger found there was a "deeply troubling" impact on children who had gone hungry over the holidays and returned to class "malnourished, sluggish and dreary". It said the evidence it had received indicated that those children "start the new term several weeks, if not months, intellectually behind their more fortunate peers."

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR MCINNES

The percentage of Free School Meal (FSM) children has risen slightly in Devon over the past 4 years but is still around 10% lower than Plymouth where FSM pupils make up almost a third of the cohort. The table below provides further information:

		-	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Primary Pupils							
878	Devon	-	18.30	19.00	19.80	19.80	19.10
879	Plymouth	-	28.90	29.30	30.20	30.00	29.80
Secondary Pupils							
878	Devon	-	19.70	20.70	21.30	21.60	22.20
879	Plymouth	-	27.00	28.50	31.00	32.50	32.90

It has recently been reported that some Local Authorities including Plymouth have developed a very effective way of distributing schools meals to children over the holidays. The Council understand that the Plymouth project is run through the company that provides their FSM, and staff deliver the packed lunches in their own time and suppliers give the ingredients for free to areas such as parks, . <http://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2017-08-02/scheme-aims-to-prevent-children-going-hungry-during-summer-holidays/>

Whilst recognising the value of the Plymouth project, Devon is faced with a significantly different challenge to Plymouth given the size of the county and the distribution of pupils on FSM over a large rural area. The Council's learning communities with the highest percentages of FSM pupils are:

Sidmouth	13.0%
Teignmouth	13.0%
Totnes	13.2%
Okehampton	13.4%
Honiton	13.8%
Torrington	14.0%
Holsworthy	14.1%
Exeter - Beacon	14.8%
Exeter - West Exe	15.0%
Tiverton	15.7%
Bideford	15.7%
Dartmouth	16.1%
Ilfracombe	16.9%
Barnstaple	16.9%
Newton Abbot	17.1%
Exeter - Central and Chestnut	18.4%

A project of the type described above for Plymouth would I am sure be welcome and one we may perhaps want to consider, but this would require significant officer time, volunteers and help from our school meal provider. A more community based approach may be a more viable option, it should however be noted that there are significant health and safety requirements for the provision and transport of meals for children.

The Local Authority has actively encouraged schools to take part in the Department for Education Summer Holiday Club programme. This provided secondary schools with funding to run a summer school for children on FSM, the funding also enabled other students to access the provision. In summer 2016, 26 out of 37 Devon schools provided this opportunity. Unfortunately the Department for Education did not provide funding for summer 2017.

A variety of organisations, including schools do still run holiday clubs and information about these are available on the link below, however these are most often fee paying. <https://services.pinpointdevon.co.uk/kb5/devon/services/results.page?qt=summer+clubs&communitychannel=0&term=&sorttype=distance&spradius=5>

As part of its commitment to the well-being of children and families, Devon ran a big campaign approximately 4 years ago to promote before and after school clubs and we still actively encourage their development. 127 maintained schools now offer before school/breakfast clubs during term time and a further 37 provide information to other breakfast clubs run locally (e.g. sometimes a nursery does this and the then takes the children to school). We do not have information relating to Academies. The 'Pinpoint' website lists some of the breakfast clubs and also provides information relating to 144 after school clubs.

In response to action being undertaken by Public Health, as Alderman Spence notes, the Council's Public Health and Education departments collaborated to conduct a survey of all Devon schools (in 2015) to get a better understanding of the extent and impact of food poverty on children and young people in Devon and to gather information on the resources available to counter it. This was circulated widely and discussed at the Devon Education Forum. Schools were sent the report and asked to use it alongside their local knowledge to signpost families at risk of food poverty, particularly during the summer holiday, into local schemes. This was one of the only surveys of its kind in England and used as key evidence by the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry, "Feeding Britain", six months on. In addition and in order to further highlight the importance of this issue Public Health Devon included a chapter on food poverty within the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

Public Health Devon supports the establishment of place-based food networks that can galvanise action, including around food poverty, at a local level. For instance Public Health Devon has supported Exeter Food Network. This was established in 2014 as a way of piloting the implementation of the Devon Strategic Partnership's food strategy at a local level. This has been very successful. It has brought together almost 20 organisations in the city concerned with food, including those concerned with food poverty. One of the responses of the group was to pilot a summer holiday cookery school aimed specifically at children at risk of holiday hunger. This has gone from strength to strength and is in its 3rd year of operation. The network has plans to expand this scheme across the city and to find ways of ensuring its sustainability.

Exeter Food Network is now part of the national Sustainable Food Cities Network and has been able to attract funding (for example for its Sugar Smart Exeter campaign) and is getting involved in the new national initiative to tackle food poverty called "Food Power".

This model of supporting the development of local networks is being shared with other districts across Devon and is stimulating action in other parts of the county. For instance Public Health initiated the establishment of the Ilfracombe Food Network with a focus predominately on food poverty.