

Briefing Paper for Policy Makers and Service Providers

Holidays for families in need: the research and policy context

In a recent study of families in need¹, holidays were identified by parents as particularly beneficial in a variety of ways, including helping to strengthen family relationships. However, the family holiday was also the most common area of expenditure to be sacrificed by those living in poverty. The Family Holidays Association, a charitable trust providing grants for holidays, commissioned the POLICY RESEARCH BUREAU to explore these issues further through a review and scoping study of relevant research and policy. The review examined existing literature on the levels of holiday participation, the benefits of holidays to families, and policy and practice on this issue. It also involved a series of discussions with key family policy experts. Below we summarise our key findings and conclusions.

- Holidays have widely been argued to be a social right, with commentators citing various international agreements including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Social surveys have consistently shown that most adults consider holidays to be a basic necessity in a developed country.
- Nevertheless, about a third of the UK population do not have a holiday each year. This is a higher proportion than many other European countries. The most commonly cited reason for non-participation is low-income, marking out the lack of holiday opportunities for many children and families as a clear aspect of social exclusion.
- There is a paucity of scientifically robust research on the benefits of holidays for families and children. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of perceived benefits, at both the individual and family level. Families in need, who are the most likely to be excluded from participation, are arguably also the most likely to feel these benefits.
- The provision of holidays for disadvantaged families has been extensively developed in mainland Europe under the banner of Social Tourism. Methods of delivery have included state or employers' subsidised holiday centres and state grants.
- UK policy developments on increasing access to tourism have generally been approached from a tourism industry, rather than social care, perspective. Priority has been given to increasing access for disabled people.
- Any UK state provision of holidays has tended to be initiated at a local level to individuals on an *ad hoc* basis. Some limited provision has also been available through the charity sector. "Social Tourism" for families in need is not currently a familiar concept in UK policy or practice.
- The review concluded that the provision of holidays for families and children in need was underdeveloped both in social policy research, and policy and practice. There is a clear need for further research, including scientifically robust studies on the benefits of holidays, and a cross-national comparison of the ways countries have developed social tourism for disadvantaged families. It is recommended that Social Tourism policies and practice might be developed in UK in the context of the social inclusion of children and families.

Introduction

Policy concern for children and families in need has increased substantially in recent years. A recent study of families in need by the Policy Research Bureau found that parents emphasised the importance of holidays, both for strengthening family relationships and for respite from stress at home¹. Ironically, however, the family holiday was the first basic item of expenditure to be sacrificed in low-income families, and the majority of families in the study could not afford a holiday away from home. This briefing summarises further research carried out by PRB, commissioned by the Family Holiday Association (FHA), to explore these issues. The scoping study reviewed what is known about holidays for families in need, the current policy and practice context for such provision, and suggested avenues for future development.

Participation and non-participation

Almost £40 billion is spent by people in England alone on holidays (four or more nights away) each year². Although there are no reliable figures for parents and children specifically, approximately two-thirds of the UK population go on holiday. This UK participation rate compares favourably with numbers who take holidays in the poorer southern and eastern European countries, but is rather lower than many others in northern Europe. In particular, Germany, the Low Countries and Scandinavia typically have a holiday participation rate of more than three-quarters of the population. Recent years have seen a growing body of research considering why some people do not go on holiday. Non-participants are usually divided into three groups:

- Those with income constraints;
- Those with other constraints (e.g. poor health, or insufficient time);
- Those who prefer not to holiday.

Low-income tends to be the most commonly cited reason for not going on holiday (although pressures of work prevail in the US and Japan). Participation rates across Europe have been fairly stable over the past four decades, leading researchers to argue that each country has a “ceiling” to holiday participation. The ceiling seems to be determined mainly by respective population wealth (including redistribution to low-income families), and the degree to which each country recognises holidays as a social right and is prepared to institute policies accordingly.

International policy and practice

Family holiday participation has been recognised as a social policy concern in the rest of Europe since the mid-20th Century, a movement enhanced by the establishment of the *Bureau International du Tourisme Social* in 1963. Since that time, holiday provision has widely been incorporated into governments' social care policies. The method of delivery of Social Tourism provision has varied from country to country. Some western European governments subsidise holiday centres and camps, and some provide grants directly to disadvantaged groups (e.g. *cheques-vacances* in France). Holidays have also typically been provided through employers and unions (particularly in Eastern Europe). The development of pan-European bodies has introduced the UK government to Social Tourism for families, specifically through the European Commission's Ministerial Conferences on "Tourism for All"

Holidays as a social right

It has been widely argued in research and policy contexts that taking a regular holiday, whether as an individual or as a family, should be considered a social right. Various international agreements have been cited in indirect support of this argument, including the “right to relaxation” from the UN Declaration on Human Rights. The World Tourism Organization (a UN entity) also enshrines the “right to leisure and vacation”, but the UK is not a member state. More pertinently, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) states that all children should have equal opportunities to recreation and leisure. Certainly, the literature has suggested that children whose holiday opportunities are limited in contrast to their peers can feel deprived or socially excluded. This idea that families who do not go holiday could be considered socially excluded is given some weight by social surveys, which have consistently identified that “a holiday at least once a year” is considered a “necessity” by the majority of people.

The benefits of family holidays

Perhaps due to a common-sense assumption that holidays are “good for you”, there is a distinct lack of scientifically robust research on outcomes from holidays. Further research is required in this area to draw clear conclusions. Nevertheless, a combination of research on specific groups (e.g.

cancer patients, looked after children), surveys of professionals, and studies from related areas (e.g. respite care) does suggest benefits to both individuals and families in a number of key ways:

Individuals

- Relief and “renewal” – a break from routine to reflect and rebuild strength
- Mental health – combating anxiety and depression through rest and relaxation
- Physical health – e.g. through change of diet
- Reduced social isolation
- Broadening experiences – e.g. through exploring overseas cultures
- Learning new skills
- Developing independence – especially when the holiday allows greater freedom from carers

Families

- Bonding – strengthening interpersonal relationships, shared fun memories
- Developing support networks – e.g. parents finding new friends to discuss “parenting issues”

Importantly, the literature has repeatedly suggested that the social and health benefits of holidays may be most keenly felt by those disadvantaged in society, who perhaps felt more stressed or isolated. It has not gone unnoticed by commentators that these are the same people most likely to go without a regular holiday. This has led commentators to argue that non-participation of holidays is a clear social policy issue with health and social care implications for children and families.

UK policy and practice

The issue of increasing access to tourism has been placed on the UK policy agenda, initially through the Tourism for All Consortium, and more recently through a number of cross-departmental Tourism Summits. A recent government report³ stated that tourism should be “open to all”. So far, however, UK policy development in this area has differed from other countries in two main ways. Firstly, it has tended to focus on increasing participation for the economic benefit of the tourism industry rather than for “social care” reasons. So, for example the Department of Health was conspicuously absent from Tourism Summit discussions on open access. Secondly, “tourism for all” has effectively been translated as about increasing accessibility for disabled people rather than promoting wider access for all disadvantaged groups. This may have led to a lack of consciousness among social policy makers about the concept of tourism in

social care for families in need

Thus, in practice, any state provision of holidays in the UK has been instituted at a local level, and on an *ad hoc* basis (sometimes as part of a respite-care package). Funding arrangements have certainly not reflected any systematic planning. For example, although there has been no mapping of state provision since the mid-1970s⁴, local authorities have sometimes made funds for family holidays available under a diverse range of legislative frameworks, including:

- 1948 NHS Act [for convalescence]
- 1970 Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act [for disabled people]
- 1989 Children’s Act – Section 17 [to support children in the community]

In further contrast to other parts of Europe, any social care provision in the UK has largely been directed to individuals with specific needs (e.g. the elderly infirm; outward-bound courses for young offenders) rather than to low-income families in general. Similarly, industry-led schemes have typically focused on individuals (again mainly the elderly), often through out-of-season discounts less appropriate to families with children at school. On the whole, help for disadvantaged children and families has tended to come from the voluntary sector. Although, for example, the FHA provides for low income families generally, help has again more typically been offered to specific need groups (e.g. the “Gingerbread” scheme for one-parent families). There appears to be mixed awareness among policy makers and practitioners about existing voluntary sector provision. This again points to the absence of Social Tourism as a concept in UK social care policy and practice for families, despite its relevance to social inclusion.

Further research

This review has highlighted the provision of holidays for families and children in need as an underdeveloped area of social care, both in research and in UK policy and practice. Further research needed to inform policy developments in this area includes:

- Mapping provision of holidays for those in need, with reference to relevant legislative frameworks (e.g. Children’s Act 1989), to identify gaps.
- Scientifically robust research and evaluations to compare the direct benefits (outcomes) of different types of holidays for different groups (e.g. children vs. adults).
- Cost-benefit analysis of social tourism to identify

the indirect (diffused) impacts of this type of family support (e.g. exchequer savings through less youth crime)

- Up-to-date cross-national comparison of the different ways countries have developed social tourism.
- An exploration of young people's views on holidays, including benefits and preferences.

Recommendations for Social Tourism

Organisations

The review suggested a number of avenues for Social Tourism organisations to explore with a view to developing policy and practice within the UK. These might include:

- Supporting a programme of research to inform policy and practice development in social tourism.
- Promoting of Social Tourism as an explicit concept in the UK. This might usefully be pursued within the existing "Tourism For All" policy framework.
- Exploring how provision can be tied to the current government's social inclusion agenda – perhaps as "Social Inclusion Tourism"
- Building closer links with international social tourism organisations, and learning from the more established systems in other countries.
- Building closer links with local authorities to ensure awareness of existing provision, referral of those most in need, a more "needs-focused" service, and ensuring "additionality".
- Considering whether voluntary sector resources are best used by broad funding of generalised need groups (e.g. low-income families) or targeted at specialist need groups (e.g. holidays for severely disabled).
- Considering how to maximise outcomes from funding by playing to the perceived benefits of holidays (e.g. supporting activity holidays that allow children to learn new skills).

Key References

- ¹ Ghate D and Hazel N (2002) *Parenting in poor environments* London: Jessica Kingsley
- ² English Tourism Council (2002) *Report to the Tourism Summit, 6th March 2001* London: Department of Culture Media and Sport
- ³ Department of Culture Media and Sport (1999) *Tomorrow's Tourism Forward* Lon: Stationery Office
- ⁴ English Tourism Board (1976) *Holidays: the social need* London: ETB

About the review and scoping study

The review and scoping study was carried out between Autumn 2002 and Spring 2003. It consisted primarily of a review of research literature relating to the provision of holidays for disadvantaged groups. Searches were carried out through the internet, in academic libraries, on specialist research databases, and through our contacts in the social care and tourism fields. Relevant literature was collated and analysed thematically to identify the knowledge base on this topic.

This analysis was further informed by a series of discussions with policy makers from a range of government departments, and social services practitioners from a small sample of local authorities. These discussions provided a contextual outline of current policy and practice for the research review.

The full findings from the project will be published in article form. Further copies of this Briefing Paper can be obtained from the Family Holiday Association.

POLICY • RESEARCH BUREAU



The POLICY RESEARCH BUREAU (www.prb.org.uk) is an independent, social policy research centre based in London. We specialise in applied research involving the family and young people, and in making our work useful to others in the policy and practice arena. PRB is a department of The Dartington Hall Trust, a company limited by guarantee, registered in England as a charity. Contact us at: THE POLICY RESEARCH BUREAU, 2A Tabernacle Street, London EC2A 4LU. Tel: 0207 256 6300 Fax: 0207 256 6360. Email admin@prb.org.uk.



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The Family Holiday Association is the only UK national charity dedicated to providing holidays for deprived families. The FHA celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2000. FHA grants usually cover the cost of accommodation, travel and food for one week, generally at a UK seaside holiday centre.