

## The Grub Hub – Summer 2019

During the summer of 2019 Didcot First Ltd and SOFEA came together to run The Grub Hub.

A project designed to feed children who would be missing their free school meal during the school holiday.

It was identified that 590 children were entitled to free school, meals from the 6 most central schools (Stephen Freeman, Manor, Northbourne, Willowcroft, Ladygrove Park and All Saints) so we elected to work with and through only these schools in the first instance.

### The Plan:

We decided to cook three meals every week (Mon, Wed, Fri) and to spread them over 3 venues (The Railway Centre, The Barn and The Civic Hall). Once risk assessments and site visits were conducted, we settled on 2 venues and dropped The Barn as their kitchen lacked some essential aspects such as a second sink. The venues had to have sufficient space, adequate toilets and a professional kitchen set up. We decided against school venues as the children were on holiday and if felt right to use different places.

We would use a mix of paid support from SOFEA who employed Sue Carter as the Cook (her day job is School Cook at Manor School) and Didcot First Ltd who employed Di Chesterman to arrange the volunteers and activities.

The main bulk of the work would be carried out by a team of volunteers recruited from a variety of organisations.

### The Volunteers:

We recruited a total of 43 volunteers aged from 14yrs – 84yrs and from diverse organisations such as St Birinus Sch, Didcot Girls Sch, Churches Together, The Rotary Club, The WI and individual contacts and friends.

We aimed to have 2 volunteers on a reception desk welcoming and registering families and being a static point of contact. We held useful leaflets on the desk (e.g info re the Community Larder, Childrens Library service etc) and also distributed any surplus food from here (some food from SOFEA and some surplus allotment produce brought in by volunteers).

We had around 6 volunteers in the kitchen to work under Sue's direction to prepare, serve and clear up.

We had around 6 volunteers supporting the activities – encouraging children and families to get involved.

**The total number of volunteer hours given was 955**

## The Families:

We directed our advertising through the schools, asking them to hand the flier to families they identified as being 'in need'. Generally, pupils on free school meals or pupil premium.

Ultimately families came from a variety of sources – these were all cited as sources of info:

All Saints School 2	Manor School 4	Word of Mouth 16
Family Solutions 1	Stephen Freeman Sch 1	SOFEA 4
Church 1	Northbourne Sch 1	Willowcroft Sch 5
Mums in Didcot (FB) 1	Balsam 2	Dropped In 1
Other 1	Library 1	Ladygrove Park Sch 1
Undeclared 3		

**This means 45 families visited over the summer, many of them visiting on more than one occasion as seen in the table below.**

Date	No of families	No of adults	No of children
29 <sup>th</sup> July	4	5	10
31 <sup>st</sup> July	8	11	25
2 <sup>nd</sup> Aug	7	9	18
5 <sup>th</sup> Aug	9	10	20
7 <sup>th</sup> Aug	10	13	23
9 <sup>th</sup> Aug	12	15	23
12 <sup>th</sup> Aug	19	25	48
14 <sup>th</sup> Aug	18	24	41
16 <sup>th</sup> Aug	18	19	44
19 <sup>th</sup> Aug	10	13	26
21 <sup>st</sup> Aug	11	13	27
23 <sup>rd</sup> Aug	9	11	18
28 <sup>th</sup> Aug	8	10	16
30 <sup>th</sup> Aug	9	11	19
2 <sup>nd</sup> Sept	15	21	29
<b>Totals</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>387</b>

## The ages of children attending and eating:

Age	No of children	Age	No of children
1 and under	12	7	7
2	10	8	2
3	12	9	2
4	13	10	4
5	15	11	3
6	10	12 +	6

**Total number of pre schoolers (ie those under 5s): 47**

**Total number of Primary aged children (ie those aged 5 – 11): 49**

**Total number of secondary aged children (ie those 12 +): 6**

## Feedback and evaluation:

1. We had anticipated higher numbers and were disappointed we didn't reach enough families. However, higher numbers would require higher numbers of volunteers, additional activities and catering equipment.

On the busiest day during this summer, families were reported to say that it was over stimulating for their children especially those on the autistic spectrum and that they might not return.

**Recommendation** - to do more work on identifying families most in need and to advertise more widely using words recommended by the families such as 'low income', 'receiving benefits' and advertise in places where such families gather e.g places that are free to attend.

2. There were some heartrending stories conveyed to staff and volunteers which are humbling to hear e.g one lady had arrived in Didcot from an abusive relationship in London. She brought 2 children and a backpack, with no plan as to what happened next ! Another family on very low income, with 5 children (4 of whom have additional needs) have never had a complete family day out due to cost – they really enjoyed being out at the railway centre together 😊

**Recommendation** – to work with the community and open up sources of information. In the past the Childrens Centres provided a wealth of information about all aspects of life as well as providing experiences such as day trips for low income families. Ensure we have suitable qualified and knowledgeable staff to identify and address issues. Keep a bank of useful info from a wide variety of agencies, businesses and community groups as well as places of cheap or free entertainment.

3. We heard about lack of public transport from villages into town and between area's of town.

**Recommendation** – consider having transport support for future projects although the necessity for child seats in cars may be difficult to arrange. Or consider taking food out to village halls.

4. We learnt about the horrendous cost of school uniform and shoes. It seems that the move to branded school uniform is causing additional stigma when families can't afford the branded items.

**Recommendation** – we write to schools about the possibility of having a sew on school badge that could be attached to cheaper uniform and moved onto bigger sizes as necessary.

**Recommendation** – we consider a town wide uniform exchange / thrift shop to operate through the holidays in preparation for the new term.

### Feedback from parents / carers (in response to attached questionnaire):

#### Why did you come along ?

For Food 5      For the Venue 5      For Something to do 11      For Support 3

Something else 5 (make friends)

**Did you enjoy the food ?**      Yes 10      Sort of 1      No

**Fav Meal ?** Sausage / Chips / Roast / Chicken Curry / Flavoured Pasta / Curry / Spag Bol / Pizza / All of it / Pie and Chips / Good Choice and help yourself to fruit and salad – nice / No Favourite / Macaroni /

**Could we improve the food on offer ?** No need, great food. The food was yummy. Well done to kitchen staff. Nothing. Sometimes the chips were under cooked. Its very good. Choices could vary more. They were OK.

**How did this help family finances ?** Lovely people, lovely food. Helped a lot. Yes. My son is fussy and didn't really eat cause he would rather play. Very helpful, family and children activities can get expensive especially if adding cost of transport and food. I'm waiting for UC claim so no money over the summer. Helped hugely, normally we struggle and having Grub Hub was amazing and made a difference. Big Time. Meant we could do other activities. Really helped to feed kids a nutritional meal. It worked great and I didn't have to cook on the days we came.

**Was £2.50 good value for adult meal ?** Perfect. Yes very good 2. It sure is. Yes 10.  
Very good value. Sounds like good value.

**Did you see the flier ?** Yes 5      No 4

**Where would you advertise the Grub Hub ?** Facebook. Posters in town. Didcot Herald. Surgeries. Nurseries. Chemists. Churches. Schools. Social Media. Library. Parks. Free. Low cost kids activity places. Soha webpage. Noticeboards. Drs. Job Centre. Health Visitors. Target those on low income e.g Income Support or UC. Door to door. Village Schools. Keep away from Internet ! Civic Hall

#### What activities did the kids enjoy?

Railway Centre:      Carriages 7      Museum 5      Signal Box 5      Outdoor Space 6

Civic Hall:      Bouncy castles 11      Arts and Crafts 11      Drumming 8      Yoga 5      Book Area 4  
Table Top Games 6      Circus Skills 7      Science Boffins 6      Puzzles 4  
Playing with young volunteers 6      Visits by Library Staff 2      Toddler Toys 2

**What else could we have included?** Face Painting 2. Board games for older children e.g chess. Variety was great, maybe a music session for toddlers. Game of rounders. Cooking and Baking.

**How important was activity at the Grub Hub ?** Essential 9      Very 5      Not very      Not at all

**Would you come if it was just food ?** No – we come to play and have fun. Possibly. Maybe. Maybe but I would want other people to talk to. Yes 2 Depends. No 4.

**Would you come if it was just activities ?** Possibly, if we needed to get out of the house. Yes 5. No 2. No but would like a bring and share picnic.

**Do you use the Community Larder ?** We do 5 We Don't 5

**Would you like more info about it ?** I'm going to go. I have the info but struggle with Mondays.

**People: Anyone to mention ?** Di and Alex brilliant – all staff were lovely. The volunteers were very helpful and played with the kids. Andy the drummer, he was amazing and we both enjoyed the drumming. Sue the cook, Di and James the vol. All the volunteers were great, I am a huge fan of volunteering. Sue. Di and Sue and younger volunteer Abi. Jade and Zoe. Everyone – a big thank you. Di – exceptional job promoting with the library and being such a welcome. Steph ? and Alex. Thanks to Sue for cooking in the heat and everyone else for all they have done. Jade. James.

**Anything to say ?** Thank you, hope you do it again. Great job all the volunteers. They have all done a brilliant job, friendly and join in. My son loves talks to the volunteers and they all plays with him. Thanks a lot it means a lot that there are people that are happy to engage with my children and cook me a lovely hot meal. Amazing. Amazing people who really help families like us, little people make big impacts on peoples lives. All good and help wherever they can. Thank you. Think they are all doing a great job, every one of them. All very helpful and enthusiastic. All made us feel welcome. Brilliant, kind, caring and really approachable, easy to talk to. Very kind and helpful.

**Did the yellow aprons help ?** Yes 13 Yes very bright 1 Definitely 1 Yes, really good idea 1

**Would you like the GH to run next summer** Yes 17 No

**During other holidays ?** Yes 15 No

**Why?** Perfect for kids. Daughter loves it especially playing with all the children. It is a valuable resource for filling up long days and empty stomachs, I can see it being very popular in inclement weather there isn't a great deal to do around here ! Because my son enjoys it so much and it makes me come out. I like the sense of community and being with people who care. Helps as on a low income. It has been a life saver for us, we have really enjoyed it so much, Thank you guys. Good for the kids. Because it was fun for my son and me. It gives the parents other people to talk to and the children to mix with other children. Good fun, children to mix with others their own age, great for them to play and eat together. Encourages families to come out and have practical help and interaction with a mealtime. Good way to meet people and for children to play. Really goods and affordable. Because I am a single mum with 5 children and without it I don't know how I would of coped, it really helped bringing the children to somewhere that doesn't cost much. It keeps the children make new friends.

### **Quotes !**

A shared meal brings people together, the activities and people enrich the time we share together.

Shame there is a need but great to have willing volunteers.

Really well worth trying.

Its handy for mums to make new friends.

## Feedback from the children: (collected on post its on the Feedback Donkey picture)

### Liked:

The train rides 8      The Food 7      Grapes 1      The History (at DRC) 1      Fun 1  
Friends 4      Arts and Crafts 2      Stickers 1      Drums 1      Science 2  
Entertainment 2      Bracelet making 1      Getting out to play more 1      Games 2  
Pizza 1. Drumming 1      Yoga 1      Toy trains 1      Puzzles 1      Playing 1  
Bouncy Castles 1      Fabulous 1      The cake was fantastic 1      Mums & children  
meet new friends 1      Sad to see it end 1      Please come back 1      I am sad that it is ending 1  
Work experience, it would help parents get jobs 1

**Don't like:**      The noise 1      Pink milk 1

## Feedback from Volunteers: (from an emailed set of questions)

### The venues

#### Didcot Railway Centre

- Some volunteers expressed concern regards the access (steps) to the Railway Centre but otherwise liked the venue.
- Comments were made about the poor signage to the Railway Centre, having to get through barriers and the Truck Revellers on day one !
- Generally the volunteers enjoyed the DRC and thought the families did too, especially the train ride on the last day 😊

#### Didcot Civic Hall

- The Civic Hall was generally thought to be a suitable space although those helping in the kitchen offer referred to the low sinks which were backbreaking when doing a lot of washing up.
- Some concerns were expressed about the security of the space – children could exit the building through automatic doors to the front and via a gate to the carpark from the garden.
- There were 2 days when we were moved from the main hall to the smaller hall due to another booking – this was not ideal and there was some difficulty sharing the outdoor space (The other group were using chemicals for science experiments in the garden).

### The Food

- Some volunteers felt the food was a bit bland in the first weeks but improved during the rest of the time. They understood the need to feed children food they would eat but were concerned about the amount of waste (not necessarily about the amount being cooked but the amount scraped from plates).
- Volunteers discussed the difficulty in writing a menu according to what was in the warehouse rather than writing a menu and sourcing the food.
- All volunteers enjoyed making the cakes.
- Volunteers enjoyed working with Sue and thought she did a brilliant job of organising the kitchen.

- A few volunteers elected not to eat the food provided and bought their own.
- On one occasion a volunteer rejected some cake as being 'a little dry'. We need volunteers to understand the effect such comments have on families in food poverty.

### The Activities

- No real comments about activities other than maybe add some more activities for older children (chess, complex puzzles etc)
- Volunteers who commented were generally the older volunteers and those who worked in the kitchen. The younger volunteers who helped mostly with activities have not provided feedback.

### General Comments

- Volunteers were overwhelmingly positive about the experience
- All would volunteer again
- All felt there should have been more families making use of the provision
- All volunteers have made suggestions about different venues to try, food to serve, activities to arrange and places to market the scheme.

### Organisational observations and recommendations

Taking all the above feedback into account I make the following observations and / or recommendations:

1. Rebook at Didcot Railway Centre, Civic Hall and at least one other venue for next summer. Ensure we have trains running on at least one day.
2. Engagement with schools, other childcare providers/services needs to be stronger and conducted earlier.
3. Word of mouth and social media seems to be key, so use these methods rather than fliers to attract participants.
4. Earlier sign up of volunteers and a longer induction session – ensuring that they are more aware of the issues that affect the target families.
5. The mix of ages of volunteers worked well – it was good to see the integration of generations.
6. Make more use of the reception desk to provide information about other services e.g community larder, local free activities, CAB and to offer some takeaway items food / vouchers etc.
7. Provide more variety of food (over the course of the scheme) and find a way of boxing surplus to send home.
8. Invite volunteers to be involved in preparation stages especially in food planning – some vols have existing catering knowledge and skills.
9. Consider some cooking lessons as part of the scheme – teach people to cook nutritious meals from scratch using fresh / discounted ingredients e.g veg soups etc
10. Child sized cutlery, plates and beakers are essential.
11. Run a uniform thrift shop throughout the scheme.

12. Have a hot drinks station available – many people were coming for social inclusion and a chat.
13. All the toys, games and books were borrowed from one source which meant a lot of loading and unloading at home and venue. Expand the variety of games, toys and puzzles to cover all ages.
14. Have a planned themed activity programme which encourages ongoing participation e.g, An activity passport where children collect stamps for participating in particular arts and crafts sessions which are promoted in advance
15. Book additional ‘specialist’ childrens entertainers – Andy Fowler (Circus Skills and Drumming) was brilliant and motivated children and adults to get involved.
16. Consider what provision could happen at Christmas and Easter too. In discussion with parents it transpires that they often find Christmas harder to deal with – having children home from school means increased heating costs, pressure to buy presents, no free indoor places to visit – the children can’t play out in the garden or parks as much, their friends are receiving so much more in the way of material goods and experiences. Parental mental health seems to take a real dive at Christmas when relationship difficulties are exacerbated.

### **My Observations:**

Numbers will always be difficult to anticipate, families don’t like to commit to any particular days preferring to be more spontaneous.

Although the food is welcomed – many families were wanting somewhere to go and something to do – this is the gap left by the closure of the childrens centres.

A few day trips with a shared picnic would be welcomed – this could be a simple train journey to Cholsey or a coach trip to the seaside (potential funding from Rotary Club or Churches Together) or just a meet up in the park (weather dependent).

The volunteers are all wonderful but there will always be a need for a couple of ‘Managers’ and a team of very regular volunteers to see the scheme through from conception to end. It takes time to build trust and there is a need for consistency in order for families to open up and share their stories, seek help and discuss issues in depth.

The behaviour of vulnerable children can be chaotic and difficult to handle – we had once instance of a family leaving the Grub Hub as the child of another family had sworn and threatened harm. I spoke to the aggrieved parent at length on Sunday afternoon and to the parent against whom the complaint was made on the following Monday. No further action was required – both parents just needed to talk about the difficult role of parenting children with additional needs.



### **Stories that really struck a chord:**

Mum arrived in Didcot from London escaping an abusive relationship. Brought 2 boys and a backpack, nothing more. Now settled in housing but living on GWP with children at All Saints and no transport. Both mum and children have health problems and need to get into Oxford regularly.

Family of 5 on low income. 3 children have autism, one is deaf. All children attend different schools. They have never been out as an entire family as it is too expensive and difficult, but they attended the Railway Centre each week and loved the experience.

Single pregnant mum living in outlying village, former drug user, with other children in care and a toddler at home struggled to get into Didcot. But she was enthusiastic about the play experience her child had with one of the SBS student volunteers.

Family of 4 Mum and Dad both have health issues, baby and daughter 4yrs very shy and reluctant to engage at the start of the scheme was drawn out of herself eventually laughing and joining in by the end of the summer.

One low income family had lost their summer holiday due to the sudden death of a grandparent. The 5 boys were all quiet and withdrawn but enjoyed the tabletop activities – all ate heartedly. Parents and grandparents were all grateful for the scheme and felt it took some pressure of the family at a tough time.

One mum was in divorce proceedings and awaiting a Universal Credit payment plan – she had no income over the summer.

Many parents spoke about the cost of school uniform – especially branded items that schools insist on – as well as the cost of shoes. Some (but not all) schools have thrift shops but these are not open in holidays when parents are preparing for school admission. Uniforms were supposed to level the playing field, but the branded items can be 3 times as expensive as non-branded uniform. Could schools have a sew on badge that could be moved from size to size ?

Several parents discussed the difficulties in raising children and finding employment. The cost of childcare and hours required by employers were barriers to employment. Many parents would prefer not to receive benefits but couldn't find suitable employment to generate enough income once childcare costs were paid. Many mums do not find the 'stay at home mum' role as satisfying as their predecessors seemed to have done.