

How you can help Britain's poorest children

As The Sunday Times launches its Christmas Appeal, *Sharon Hendry* visits Blackpool, one of the most deprived areas in Britain, to meet the teachers and parents struggling to give their children a brighter future

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER NUNN



Head teacher Roger Farley is standing in the torrential rain, greeting each of his drenched and bedraggled pupils as they arrive at the school gate. “Good morning,” he says warmly from beneath his black brolly, calling each of the children by name.

By his side is Tracey Powell. It is her job to spot anxious pupils and gently usher them into an adjoining unit called the Bridge. Here they can sit calmly with specialised support workers and talk through anything in their home life that is troubling them.

A new police software program called Encompass alerts Blackpool teachers to overnight domestic violence incidents in the homes of pupils. On one Monday morning, Farley came in to find five members of his school were affected. Children caught in the crossfire of such family disruption need gentle one-to-one interventions before they are ready to enter their classroom.

Today, one coatless eight-year-old boy with rain-flecked glasses and rosy cheeks approaches Farley and politely says hello before quietly whispering, “I need to tell you something later.” Farley nods — such requests are a normal part of the morning routine.

For the 377 children, aged between four and 11, growing up in bleak conditions on the tough Claremont estate in Blackpool, Westminster Primary Academy is a sanctuary. Here the children are warm, safe and fed, surrounded by adults with their best interests at heart. This school and others serving similarly deprived communities in Blackpool are not just teaching the three Rs, they are acting as the fourth emergency service to their pupils. As Farley puts it: “Teaching in the classroom is only 10% of what we do here.”

It begins with food. All over the school are grey plastic containers filled with tangerines, brioche, waffles and cartons of milk. The children are encouraged to help themselves and to take food home with them for younger siblings if they need to. A staggering 76% of the children here qualify for “pupil premium” funding (extra money for disadvantaged kids) and 45% have special educational needs. There are 21 live child and adolescent mental health cases in the school and many more stuck in the 18-month referral queue to see a therapist.

“Some of our pupils are coming to school each day from two- or three-bedroom accommodation housing seven or eight children. Lots of them are sleeping on mattresses on the floor, often with no sheets or duvets,” Farley says.

“Children are coming to us with delayed speech and language, and some reception pupils arrive still in nappies. Only 5%-10% of our children meet national education standards when they arrive — but by the time they leave, 67% are hitting national targets. Blackpool has a very transient



HUNGRY MINDS Previous pages: lunchtime at Westminster Primary Academy in Blackpool. This page, from top: pupils can help themselves to milk and fruit; head teacher Roger Farley and music teacher Kate Fard are dedicated to protecting pupils living in a bleak environment

population. A lot of their parents are single mothers escaping domestic violence and many of the 15% of parents who work are on precarious zero-hour contracts. When the job ends, so does the cash supply. And many who try to hold down a job are actually worse off anyway because of universal credit complexities.”

Farley tells me that people migrate to Blackpool because of cheap housing or sunny memories, “but they soon realise it isn’t always the happy place where they once spent a beach weekend. Homeless people are living in bushes and we’ve had to stop using the local park for PE because we have found needles and drug paraphernalia on the ground.

“Many of our children do not have a sense of being part of mainstream society. They can’t swim, they have not experienced the cinema and they have never seen sheep. Their parents do not own cars. And yet they are being tasked to meet a middle-class curriculum where Sats questions ask them to write an essay on their favourite meal. How do you write a page about your *only* meal of beans on toast? Or how do you describe walking through a wood for an English essay if you have never been to one.”

Farley and his leadership team are devoted to bridging the social gap and regularly take the children out on school trips to try to fill in the experiences other children take for granted. But for now, these much-needed trips are not happening because the long-saved-for school minibus was hot-wired and stolen from a garage while undergoing a service.

While colleagues in more affluent parts of Britain are boosting their attainment levels in preparation for Ofsted inspections, the team at Westminster Primary is trying to perform budget miracles in order to provide every child with a free PE kit and wearable shoes. Each child is issued with a special PE bag, a clean white T-shirt, shorts and black plimsolls. The school launders the kits and returns them to the pupils. This can be a lifeline, because children often have minimal washing facilities at home and turn up to school in filthy uniform; the PE kit means they always have a change of clothes.

Christmas at Westminster must be kept heartbreakingly low-key. The deputy head, Lisa Fleet, explains: “For most children in the UK, Christmas is a time of excitement, but here the feeling can be one of dread and anxiety. Our parents get into debt trying to make it happy for their children and it’s not unusual for them to be given

“Children are asked to describe their favourite meal. How do you write a page about your *only* meal of beans on toast?”

presents on the 25th and to see them in the window of payday loan shops on the 27th. This is the reality of life on the edge.

“We deliberately don’t mention Christmas until the last week of term, so the poorer children don’t feel left out. Last year, one child told us, ‘Christmas is not happening this year.’ His mum was saving for a deposit to put down on a new rental flat. We could not allow this to happen and staff rallied with various gifts and food from their own pockets. Roger went round with a tree.”

To many families in Blackpool, schools are a salvation, providing an essential safety net of food and care in otherwise chaotic lives. The problems come during holiday periods, when all this school-centred support stops. Budgets are too tight to allow for schools to be kept open, though staff and volunteers would like to be able to help families during these difficult times if the funds were available.

So The Sunday Times Christmas Appeal wants to raise money to keep schools open during the holidays to provide hot meals and a skeleton of support to vulnerable families. If we raise enough, we could also fund food parcels, Christmas presents and the kind of trips to the countryside or the beach that most children take for granted.

Last summer, readers of The Sunday Times Magazine responded to the plight of children on the crime-ridden Broadwater Farm estate in London, who were dreading the holidays. You raised an amazing £350,000 to keep the kids fed and entertained over the long summer months.

For our Christmas Appeal we are trying to broaden this effort to support families in the poorest parts of the UK with the worst educational outcomes. To this end we have partnered with the Sutton Trust, a charity that supports underprivileged kids and tries to improve educational achievement in 12 Opportunity Areas — social mobility cold spots where even the brightest children struggle to make good lives for themselves. Blackpool, which has eight of the 10 poorest neighbourhoods in the country, tops this list. That is why we are launching our appeal to help Children Who Dread the Holidays.

Poverty is felt most keenly during holiday periods, when the school is forced to shut its doors. “Many children end up sitting in front of a computer screen or playing on the streets, which is worrying when this district has the highest knife-crime statistics,” says Sue Collins, Westminster’s senior assistant head teacher and safeguarding lead. “Responsible, containing adults are what they need — it’s the relationships with teachers that really matter.

“And the food poverty doesn’t bear thinking about,” Collins adds. “We’re aware that some desperate children take food from school and stockpile it in term time. Others are more upfront and ask, ‘Can I take extra for my brothers and sisters?’”

It’s not all doom and gloom, though, in one of Blackpool’s toughest catchment ➔

Your money can change lives

Children should not dread the school holidays. Our campaign aims to help families in some of the poorest communities in Britain at the time they need it the most.

With the money raised, we can provide support throughout the holidays, not only by keeping the schools these children rely on open, but also by funding day trips and expeditions that boost learning. It is, after all, difficult to write a descriptive passage about a wood or a beach if you have never actually been to one.

Your generosity will also allow us to spread some Christmas cheer. Below are just some of the ways your money will help. And if your company or organisation could offer a holiday experience or activity, please get in touch at thestmagazine@sunday-times.co.uk.

£10 will buy ingredients for a home-cooked meal for a family of six

£20 will buy a Christmas present for a child who otherwise won’t get one

£25 will cover the cost of energy for cooking and heating over the holidays

£30 would pay for electricity to provide lighting, washing and drying of clothes and bedding during the holidays

£50 will provide a family with a Christmas food hamper

£200 will take a group of 30 children walking in the countryside

£250 will fund a “street play” party

£300 will fund a holiday outing to an art gallery or a museum

£800 will pay for a group of children to go camping next summer

£2,000 will refurbish and restock a primary school library

£2,500 will pay support workers to keep a school open over Christmas

£5,000 will pay the deposit on a minibus so that schools can take children on trips themselves

To donate, go to thesundaytimes.co.uk/christmasappeal2019

We have partnered with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. The charity focuses on 12 so-called Opportunity Areas including Blackpool, Scarborough and Hastings, and runs a network of hub schools to improve social mobility. The money raised by our appeal will be distributed through the EEF network and its staff on the ground will ensure due diligence. The EEF was established by the Sutton Trust and Impetus charities.

areas. The music teacher Kate Fard has been instilling the sound of confidence in her pupils for 28 years and is proud of a scheme that allows them to take instruments home. A tiny, vivacious lady who exudes warmth and cheerfulness, she enthuses: "There is nothing quite like seeing a class of 30 children simultaneously opening violin cases for the first time. Just thinking about the look of wonder on their faces gives me goose bumps every time."

"We allow our children to take the instruments back home to practise and it has been known to see the odd string or percussion piece in the pawn shop, but we can never give up on these amazing, deserving children. If we don't believe in them, who else is going to?"

Westminster is far from the only school in Blackpool going way beyond a teacher's

brief. At Christ the King Catholic Academy, the multitasking head teacher, Sarah Smith, is a warm, determined 42-year-old woman with blonde spiky hair and no-nonsense padded jacket. For her pupils and their families, she is also often a combination of Mother Teresa and Mary Poppins.

"Schools are supporting communities from the cradle to the grave in a way that has never been seen before in the UK," she says. "Twenty years ago, I came into this profession naively wanting to make a difference through teaching. I had no idea that I would be providing cots, food, clothing and even contributing towards transport for hospital appointments."

Today, Smith and her colleague Esther Hemingway are visiting the most needy families in the school in her Honda Jazz. Hemingway is one of three family support

workers who during term time provide the vital link between home and school. When children are missing from the register or parents are struggling with mental health issues, it is this team's job to notice.

At one point Smith takes a call from social services and can be heard imploring the official: "For goodness sake, something must be done. Yesterday he was so hungry, we caught him eating stationery."

She says her hands-on approach is by no means unique. "Lots of heads are the same. It's physically and emotionally draining, but we would work 24/7 if we could. Social services are stretched, child and adolescent mental health services are stretched, GPs are stretched. Instead, parents and children are sitting in my office having a cry."

Smith agrees that schools should be kept open during the holidays, noting that ➤➤➤

"Without the school, there's no Christmas"

In a scene reminiscent of a Madonna and Child, Naomi Appleby cradles her baby and gazes lovingly into his blue eyes. Consumed by maternal bliss, she can briefly forget the steel oxygen tank intruding on their intimacy and the poverty that gnaws at the fabric of family life.

Arlo was born 15 weeks premature in September 2018, weighing just 1.8lb. With a collapsed lung and a hole in the heart, his chances of survival were slim — but, against all the odds, he is preparing for a second Christmas.

As a resident of one Britain's poorest districts, expectations of Santa will be low, but he is in desperate need of a cot. So the school Arlo's older siblings attend, Christ the King Catholic Academy, is once again stepping in to help.

Appleby gently pats her son's oxygen tubes more firmly into his nose and says: "Every week we struggle to make ends meet, and without the school I would be really worried. Last year it paid for our Christmas dinner and this year it is providing a cot for Arlo. He is still in a 'next to me' one attached to our bed and there isn't enough room for him to sleep comfortably."

"School is the one organisation we have come to trust as a safety net as it gets harder to survive. It's massive for my children to have somewhere to go every day that is safe, warm and offers something to eat. School is the one place my children can be children and not have to worry about anything."



COMFORT BLANKET Naomi Appleby needs a cot for her son, Arlo

Arlo has chronic lung disease and suffers from reoccurring bronchitis. When he had a relapse on Christmas Day last year and was rushed to hospital, one of his sisters was taken in by the school's head teacher, Sarah Smith, for a turkey lunch. Smith is also helping to fund his cot this year.

Appleby, 29, has fond memories of her time at the school, which is on Blackpool's impoverished Grange Park estate, and did not hesitate to entrust her daughters, Lucy-Rose, 7, and Darcey, 5, to the same institution. She says: "It was such a safe place and I count those years as some of the best of my life."

A slight woman with pale skin and tired eyes, Appleby left school determined to transcend the barriers of her own upbringing in Blackpool's deprived Park ward and completed a foundation degree before finding a job as a hospital auxiliary worker. She married Liam, 30, a hod-carrier, and they began raising a family on a modest budget. Despite his erratic work patterns, they were marginally beating the odds of austerity. Then Arlo arrived.

"I had a bad pregnancy and was in and out of hospital a lot. Then one day I began losing a lot of water and was rushed into Blackpool Victoria Hospital. Arlo was delivered at just 25 weeks and immediately taken away to be ventilated and transferred to Royal Preston Hospital.

"It was a really hard time. My husband doesn't get sick pay and couldn't work, so we immediately got into rent arrears. Before we knew it, the rug was slipping from under our feet.

"The school stepped in and provided wraparound care for our girls in breakfast and after-school clubs. In holidays it's harder as we can't afford to take them anywhere. We managed to take the girls to the cinema to see *The Lion King* at half-term, but it is unlikely we will be able to take them out anywhere this Christmas. Every year I dread Christmas and rely on a savings scheme I pay into monthly. If I can keep up the payments, I get £230 in food and clothing vouchers."

hospitals and fire services don't shut over the Christmas and summer breaks. "No government would think of closing those services during holiday periods, so why are we closing schools? They are a lifeline during holidays and we worry the most about children at these times. I give out my phone number to parents during holidays and some people think I'm crazy, but why? There is still a kid in that family home and they rely on us as much as any of the other services. Sometimes our children tell us 'Santa isn't coming', and it's heartbreaking. How can we stand by and let it happen?"

The chancellor, Sajid Javid, recently said how fortunate voters are to have a Conservative government with "absolute poverty at its lowest on record, rising wages and record employment". But after a decade of austerity, parents in Blackpool — which is home to some of the country's poorest 1% — do not agree.

The seaside resort's prewar heyday is a long-faded memory. Plenty of cheap housing left over from the Victorian boom has resulted in Blackpool having among the lowest rents in the country, but this means the town is importing our neediest families. Locals say accommodation is of poor quality — and many of the houses we visited were damp and cold. Transience and benefit changes — particularly the long wait for universal credit — are to blame, locals say.

Blackpool exports healthy, skilled people and imports the unskilled, the unemployed and the unwell. More than 10% of working-age residents live on state benefits paid to those deemed too sick to work. Some of the most common problems are depression, stress and anxiety. Blackpool has the highest rate of antidepressant prescriptions in the country. Life expectancy, already the lowest in England, has started to fall.

Meanwhile, Blackpool's secondary school pupils are more than two years behind the national average by the age of 16 (and get £2,500 less per pupil than schools in the capital). This means the doors that could be opened by GCSE qualifications and ensuing A-levels, college and university are likely to stay closed.

Education statistics, however, are not at the forefront of Smith's mind as she drives to the run-down rented house of Gareth Gaukroger, a father of four. The 34-year-old former market trader was forced to give up work when the mother of his children left. He now has custody of Levi, 16, Courtney, 14, Dominic, 11, and Clayton, 6 — and is struggling to make ends meet on a universal credit concoction that leaves him £130 short of rent, utility and food requirements each month. His house is cold and in the sitting room, which is also where he sleeps, we keep our coats on as we chat.



POVERTY TRAP Gareth Gaukroger (left) looks after four children on his own and often goes hungry. Mother of three Tracy Smith was given a cooker by her sons' school



The school Gaukroger's children attend has previously stepped in with food parcels and Christmas presents, and once Smith drove round offering to do the family's laundry herself to help him out.

Inside the door of the three-bedroom rented home, a House Rules sign sits proudly above a fragile shoe rack. The rules include "Know you are loved" and "Dream big", but such affirmations must seem difficult in a home where they often have to choose between food and warmth. There is a large television, shelves full of DVDs and a PS4: Gaukroger explains that since the family can rarely afford to go out, he has to keep the kids entertained somehow.

"I was living with my ex-wife in Halifax when she said she wanted to come to Blackpool because her mum lived here," he says. "It was great at first and I managed to find a job in Wetherspoon's, but so much of the work here is seasonal and the money went dry. My ex left and went back to Halifax, so it was me and the kids. I couldn't keep up with the rent and we had to go to a hostel [the five of them had two rooms] for three months before we got this place.

"They're my kids, so it's my responsibility to look after them, but every day is hard. We rely on help from the school for bread and milk — and Blackpool charities for food parcels. We eat a lot of Yorkshire puddings because they fill us up. The kids get really bored of them.

"Sometimes children tell us 'Santa isn't coming', and it's heartbreaking. How can we stand by and let it happen?"

"I hate handouts because I feel I'm not paying for my children, but I can't work and raise four kids alone. We've had the heating on once in the past two weeks. We're always wearing coats and jumpers in the house.

"Like a lot of parents in this situation, Christmas feels like a nightmare. I'm not going to be able to buy my children anything and will have to rely on vouchers for clothes. Maybe the school will provide a few presents for the younger ones. It's hard for the kids because they can't choose anything and I can't give them phones, which is what they really want.

"The school offers us a lot of support. They understand that I want to get a job so that my kids can see what a working man looks like, but it's hard during holidays when there is childcare to factor in. I'm looking for a part-time job and I've been for five interviews in the past two weeks. One bar job on the promenade attracted 472 applicants. I don't think people realise how bad it can be. There are weeks when I only eat every two days. I can manage, but I want this country to understand the plight of children. It's not their fault."

A town built for day-trippers is also full of risky temptations: alcohol, betting shops, arcades, fried foods, sweets. The new problem is spice, a powerful synthetic drug that turns people into zombies.

The story of Blackpool is a narrative exposing the failure of national policies to support the most vulnerable people and places. Many of its children have no concept of a world outside its overcrowded and rotting housing stock — and some have never even visited its beach.

The council said: "Blackpool has long-standing challenges and we are at least £257m a year worse off in government funding than in 2010. In addition to ➤➤➤"

continuing to provide school breakfasts, we put in a bid for the Holiday Hunger fund earlier this year to provide activities and food for our young residents during the summer holidays. Despite our obvious need, we were not given any funding. However, we worked [with partners] to ensure some children and their families had the opportunity to socialise and get active together, as well as having access to food. "Blackpool council and its partners are determined to tackle the root causes of poverty in our town. We invite government to work with us."

The deprivation of local children is shockingly evidenced when Smith returns to school for a spot of lunch and invites me to sit in on a year 5 class being quizzed gently on their lives. Only half of the 28 children raise their hands when asked if they have ever been to Blackpool's beach, and when the class is asked about visiting the countryside, one boy with shaven hair and hands nervously tucked inside his jumper sleeves asks the pupil next to him, "What's the countryside?"

Without exception, all Christ the King children speak collectively of dreading the holidays. A shy seven-year-old boy admitted "just staying in bed in my pyjamas because there's nothing to do", and a little girl next to him added: "I can hear people smashing bottles outside my house and shouting, so I can't sleep." Some muttered under their breath about "seeing drug dealing". Poignantly, many children spoke of feeling sad about the litter scattered all over Blackpool, as if attuned to a feeling that they are residing in a forgotten dumping ground.

After lunch, Smith is back on the road, the head teacher calling in on Tracy Smith, a single mum of three. Her children, Leon, 9, and Jake, 3, attend St Cuthbert's Catholic Academy, in South Shore, which Smith also oversees. Admirably, Tracy's eldest son, Brandon, 20, is studying engineering at Lancaster University.

Prone to bouts of crippling depression and anxiety, Tracy recently relied on St Cuthbert's learning mentor and support worker Esther Hemingway to help her sort out the family's three-bedroom rented home in Bloomfield. The school also supplied her with a cooker when they discovered the property had not had one for a year, and school staff restocked the fridge.

Tracy, a small woman with pink streaks in her hair, becomes tearful discussing the planned closure of the local children's centre. "I used to go there with my kids three times a week and it was a lifeline. There was a summer party with a buffet, and a trip to the Children's Museum in Halifax. The children's centre used to have nine staff. Now it only has volunteers. I don't want my children to sit in front of a screen all day, but I am only left with £73 a week after my rent



COASTAL DRIFT
Blackpool has eight of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England. Bottom left: many residents are forced to live in squalid conditions



Becky Downes moved to Blackpool with her son and daughter. She has saved supermarket stamps for presents

is paid, so doing activities in the holidays is out of the question for us unless the school steps in. It goes above and beyond for us."

The final call of the day is at the home of Becky Downes, 41. She moved to Blackpool from Coventry in July with her 11-year-old daughter, Indiana, and son Cameron, 17. Her eldest, Callum, 23, lives independently in Birmingham and her youngest son, Coby, 13, stays with his dad in Coventry.

"I've got a friend here who encouraged me to come because I'd just had enough of Coventry," Downes says. "I wanted a fresh start." She receives a £1,000 universal credit payment each month, but must deduct £565 for rent and budget for utilities and food. Christmas is an added pressure. "I've been saving Morrisons supermarket stamps and putting down instalments on three main presents for my kids. During the holidays, I occasionally take Indi down to the seafront for an ice cream, but most days we wake up not knowing what we will do without any money to spare. We save up pennies in jars, but it doesn't go very far."

"You need the best teachers in the worst areas. We have our legs tied and are expected to race against Usain Bolt"

Later, Stephen Tierney, chief executive of the Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi Academy Trust, which oversees Christ the King Academy, meets us in Smith's office and says he is proud of his schools' work, but knows holiday provision is a gap that must urgently be understood at national level.

"What must it really be like for people living in the bottom 1% of society?" he asks. "You are looking in from the outside and don't feel like any of the normal 'stuff' applies to you. Unless we expose children to the normal stuff, this feeling will become the norm for generations to come.

"Those of us working in deprived areas are doing our best to try to stabilise the families, but educationally the accountability system hammers us. You need the best teachers in the worst areas, but they won't come. Funding is sucked out, then Ofsted turns up and says it's about standards. We are standing here with our legs tied together being expected to race against Usain Bolt."

Above the head teacher's desk is a poster entitled Rules for a Better Life. They include: "When life gives you rainy days, play in puddles." Despite the odds, Blackpool teachers are trying to help their pupils do just that.

Tierney concludes: "If we don't face up to reality, the underclass is going to grow and become increasingly angry. And then will we see a more aggressive response? Do we really want that as a society?" ■