



CROYDON



# Summer on the Farm

On Britain's most notorious estate, children dread having to spend the school holidays shut away inside these blocks of flats. *Sharon Hendry* meets the families living in poverty and fear in north London's Broadwater Farm

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW TESTA



**W**hen you ask a classroom full of kids what they're doing in the summer holidays, you are usually knocked back by a wave of excitement and anticipation. But for one group of year 3 primary school children in north London, that is not the case at all.

"I might be going to the park one day," offers an eight-year-old boy flatly. "I would love to go swimming," adds a bright-eyed girl with cornrow plaits. A few other pupils offer suggestions, all quite muted.

"OK, so where would you go if you could make a wish to go anywhere or do anything?" asks their head teacher. A boy's hand shoots up first: "I would ride a bike outside." "I'd like to try a trampoline," says another girl, "or a water park — and meet Beyoncé."

There is no talk of holidays in France or Italy, or of heading for the Cornish Riviera, because these children live on Broadwater Farm, the most notorious estate in Britain. Instead, their summer holidays will be spent in dilapidated flats, with only menacing stairwells for scenery. Families here, say community leaders, are too poor to take their children off the estate and too terrified to let them play on it. While others look forward to the summer holidays, these kids dread them.

For them, Willow Primary School, rated outstanding in 2017 by Ofsted, is a safe haven. About 500 kids under 11 attend the school and the Broadwaters Children's Centre nursery on the estate, also rated outstanding, in 2016. More than a third of them qualify for "pupil premium" funding for disadvantaged children; and 16 have high levels of special needs requiring education, health and care plans.

"My team and I are already dreading the moment we have to shut the school gates for the six-week summer holiday," says Dawn Ferdinand, the school's head teacher. "For so many children living in these conditions, school is their anchor. Alongside learning, it is the place where they are fed and can play safely while their parents work.

"We have tried desperately to find a way to stay open, but, even with the lowest subsidised day rate, it adds up to more than many Broadwater Farm parents could dream of affording," she says. "Many of our

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families are being fed on as little as £35 a week. Some of our children will rarely venture outside this summer."

As their holiday dreams demonstrate, the aspirations of children living on "the Farm" are far removed from those living off it and fall a long way short of the architects' original vision for the housing project.

On its completion in 1973, Broadwater Farm was the jewel in the crown of the planning department at the London Borough of Haringey. It was a modern-day utopia cast in reinforced concrete, offering a new way of living. Interconnecting walkways were intended to be "streets in the sky" and the entire project was built on stilts to combat drainage problems caused by the marshy ground and to provide easy parking for residents' cars. But the 12 tower blocks, containing more than 1,000 dwellings, soon began to decay.

These days, visiting the Farm is a haunting experience for outsiders. The architecture is no longer new or welcoming; instead, its shadowy corners are home to drug trading and gang activity. "Road" business, as gang dealings are known, is conducted openly along a 50-yard strip on the estate known as the front line.

Following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, safety tests carried out on some housing blocks at Broadwater showed they would be vulnerable to collapse if there were a gas explosion or if a vehicle struck their base. As a result, the 18-storey Northolt building is set to be evacuated and only a handful of residents remain in six-storey Tangmere House. Both blocks are slated to be demolished. Throughout the estate, poverty is ingrained.

"For some of our children, just getting to school and having breakfast is a challenge," Ferdinand says. "We are dealing with families who are living in extreme poverty in overcrowded homes."

Ferdinand was raised on social security benefits by her single mother on the Castle Vale estate in Birmingham and quickly saw education as a transformative force. It took her from the local comprehensive through night school to a psychology degree at Nottingham University and on to a series of successful headships.

"I came here 11 years ago to make a difference to the lives of this community and change the outcomes," she says. "When I got the headship, people asked if I was going to wear a bulletproof vest. But for a girl who grew up on a tough estate where 'Get out wogs' was graffitied on the walls, it felt like coming home. In reality, once you are known here, you are pretty safe. The most important thing is the teaching and learning — it has to be outstanding all the time."

She takes pride in her record of having never permanently excluded any pupils. "Children must leave us with the expected academic levels if they are to have a chance of finding their way out of poverty, but cuts to school budgets make this even more challenging. Our children start school way below expected standards, therefore they require interventions and additional support to make the accelerated progress that is needed. They also need the emotional support of learning mentors, counsellors and other support staff.

"We strive to keep the children within the school gates for as long as possible. So we open at 7.45am, offer free bagels at 8.20am for the whole family and run a wide range of after-school activities until 6pm. We aim to give children experiences they would have if they were from more affluent backgrounds, like ballet, music lessons, gymnastics and swimming. The alternative is that some of our older children will start hanging out on Tottenham High Road, where there is gang activity."

Resentments first exploded on the estate in October 1985, after police raided the home of Cynthia Jarrett, a 49-year-old Tottenham resident, searching for stolen goods. She died from a heart attack during the raid, and the next day riots broke out as tension on the estate boiled over. About 250 police officers were injured and one, PC Keith Blakelock, died from more than 40 knife wounds during a frenzied mob attack.

After the riots, tens of millions of pounds were spent on regeneration and crime rates on the estate fell dramatically. But in 2011 riots erupted again in the area after police shot dead Mark Duggan, a suspected gang member believed to be in possession of a firearm. Duggan, who lived on Broadwater Farm, turned out to have been unarmed. A gun was found nearby. How it got there remains disputed.

Eight years on, residents fear that the Farm is becoming dangerously restless once again. Some families face severe pressures from poor housing. Chinelo Lemeh, 35, lives on the edge of the estate with her husband,



**Left: single mum Damilola Falodi lives with her five children on Broadwater Farm estate. She says her two youngest will spend most of the summer indoors**



**Chinelo Lemeh with her four sons, from left, Ike, Chibeife, Chima and Kinechi. The family live and sleep together in this cramped room in a dilapidated house on the edge of Broadwater Farm**

a security guard. The couple have four boys: Kinechi, 9, who has Down's syndrome, Ike, 7, Chima, 5, and Chibeife, 2. They live in one stifling downstairs room in a small terraced house owned by a private landlord.

Chinelo, a proud and loving mother, breaks down in tears as she opens the door to reveal the cramped conditions and peeling plaster. "It's so hard," she says, "So, so hard. We have lived like this for nine years. We share a small kitchen and bathroom, but this room is where we all have to live, sleep and eat. We have tried to get rehoused, but because my husband works, we can't get any help — not even free school meals."

Chinelo says that over the summer she has no spare money for activities, so the boys often have to stay indoors. "We try to save up to take them swimming once or twice, but most things are out of reach. The council does put on some events for children, but we cannot afford to go to most of them. I want my children to get to know the world and learn new things, but living here, it's hard. It's not safe to let them play on the estate. There is broken glass in the nearest

playground and everywhere young people are smoking weed. The older kids take over the children's spaces playing football, so what choice do I have but to keep my boys inside? We are not living — just existing."

When The Sunday Times Magazine informed Willow Primary School of Chinelo's circumstances, the head teacher referred the matter to the children's services department at Haringey council. Arrangements are being made to rehouse the family.

Damilola Falodi and her five children face a similar scenario. They are council tenants living in a three-bedroom home owned by a private landlord in Broadwater Farm's Rochford block. Damilola, 40, a single mum, says: "We were moved here from Croydon in June last year to find cockroaches, mice, exposed wires and no working boiler. We've had no heating or hot water for a year and a lot of our food money has gone to pay for electric fan heaters. We all lie awake at night listening to the mice scratching the walls.

"I've tried so many times to get the council to help us, but living on Broadwater Farm sometimes makes you feel invisible. Nobody except the school seems to care."

Damilola is also concerned about what to do with her children during the holidays. "This home is no place to bring up children, but it is where my youngest two, who are five and three, will spend most days during the summer. And I will need to keep a close eye on the older ones [aged 13, 14 and 17]. I might be able to take them to McDonald's."

The Sunday Times Magazine alerted Haringey council to the conditions inside Damilola's home, and the electrics and hot water were fixed within 24 hours. The council said: "The electrical and

pest-control issues you have raised are the responsibility of the leaseholder [the private landlord] and not Homes for Haringey [a non-profit organisation that runs housing for the borough]. After the council was made aware of these issues, Homes for Haringey has gone the extra mile to look at these urgently to get them resolved and ensure the safety and wellbeing of the family."

Despite the manifest problems, Joseph Ejifor, the leader of Haringey council, takes a positive view, saying the local authority will invest £16m in the estate over the next 18 months. "We are committed to providing at least as many council homes at council rents in the reprovision part of the estate as exists at the moment."

Still, a feeling of abandonment by outside agencies abounds at Broadwater Farm, so residents do their best to look after each other. Clasford Stirling watched the estate being built as a boy and has remained loyal to it ever since. He was made redundant from his youth leader role in 2012, but he has stayed on at Broadwater's community centre, running its youth football club, for which he was made an MBE in 2007.

"Austerity threw everybody sideways," he says. "All the youth workers were cut and now they wonder why it's mad out there and getting madder. There is simply nothing for young people to do and nowhere for them to go, except out on the road where knives and guns are seen as fun. The kids have me and the school — that's it.

"I run a £3 per session after-school club, but parents have to prioritise who gets to come. Often they will prioritise the boys and it's really sad to see the girls pressing their noses against the window, desperate to join in. During the summer holidays, people are really stuck. I'm in at the deep end. I've started running an evening event for the teens each week called Off the Street, Less Heat. There are challenging characters who turn up, but we get them boxing, ➡➡➡

playing football and badminton — and just having a chat.”

Attitudes towards the police remain ambivalent, he says, adding that stop and search continues to fuel anger among the black community. “Before the 2011 riots, stop and search was off the scale, and predictably targeting black youths,” he says.

Ejiofor of Haringey council says the local authority has secured £1.5m funding over three years from the Young Londoners Fund to improve youth provision and that serious crime is not a problem. “I don’t believe there are any no-go areas in Haringey,” he says. “We are employing a lot more outreach workers to work with gangs. We take the issues around young people’s needs very, very seriously.”

Another local trying to change the grim status quo is Archbishop Kwaku Frimpong-Manson, the leader of Broadwater Farm’s Reconciliation International church. “Jews, Muslims — everyone has access to me,” he enthuses in his cramped estate office. Originally from Ghana, he has lived on the estate since 1991. “It’s not easy to stay on the straight and narrow here,” he says. “A huge percentage of youths are not working because when people see this address, you do not go to the front of the queue. It’s a vicious circle.”

During his Sunday services, the archbishop prays for his annual summer outing, but this year there is no funding. “In the past we have taken residents to places like Thorpe Park and the O<sub>2</sub> Arena. Taking children out of this community for just one day can change lives, but all the funding has dried up. This summer, we are going to have a community walk and a get-together to discuss knife and gun crime awareness.”

It need not cost a fortune to make a difference. The Farm’s children delight in the simplest of things. Recently, a £250 “street play” event took place outside Willow Primary School, organised by its parent group. Children shrieked with joy as they played with face painting, cardboard boxes, balloons and water pistols.

“If we could provide this along with food once a week throughout the summer it could be transformative,” says Fiona Sutherland, an organiser. “But resources are at breaking point. I really worry about how these children will develop without having access to the basic right to play outside.”

It’s a need that philanthropists recognised long ago. In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, charities sprung up with the express purpose of giving deprived children from the slums of London and other cities the opportunity to go on holiday in the countryside. Modern educational research underlines how important play is for children.

“Play, both intellectual and physical, is critical for the healthy growth and learning of a child,” says Pasi Sahlberg,



**Above: a “street play” event gives children the chance to have fun outdoors. Right, from top: Dawn Ferdinand, the head teacher at**

**Willow Primary School; the youth worker Clasford Stirling helps keep kids on the estate off the streets with an after-school club**



## How you can help

**The thought that a child might dread the summer holidays was so shocking that the Sunday Times Magazine asked the head teacher of Willow Primary School what could be done to help. Dawn Ferdinand said that if we could raise some money, the school would be able to organise a series of trips and events in time for this holiday.**

**It doesn’t take much to fund these trips and they will give the children something to look forward to rather than dread.**

**A century ago, philanthropic organisations would arrange trips to the country for inner-city children during the summer. We would like to reignite this tradition, starting with Broadwater Farm.**

**£200** would take a group of 30 children swimming (including adult supervision)

**£250** would support a “street play” event

**£285** would take a group trampolining

**£300** would fund an outing to an art gallery or a museum

**£800** would pay for a trip to the seaside

**£1,650** would take a group to a UK safari park for the day

**£2,500** would support 10 of the most vulnerable children to attend the local summer play scheme

**To make a donation, please visit [justgiving.com/crowdfunding/broadwaterfarm](https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/broadwaterfarm)**

**Or are you a leisure company, art gallery, theatre or museum that could offer a summer experience? To donate money or tickets, please contact Willow Primary School at [thewillow.haringey.sch.uk](mailto:thewillow.haringey.sch.uk)**

a world-renowned educationalist and author of *Let the Children Play*, to be published in August. “If children have fewer opportunities to play, it is problematic, because it is the natural way they develop imagination, dexterity and creativity, as well as physical, cognitive and emotional strength.”

Linking isolated communities to the wider world and tackling social problems is a complex process, as Trevor Phillips, the writer, broadcaster and former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, knows from his own experience. He grew up in a small terraced house not far from Broadwater Farm.

“When I lived in that area I just didn’t know anything about the world away from N22 [the estate’s postcode] and the Finsbury Park Methodist church,” he says. “Today, TV and social media do open the world to kids growing up as I did, but I suspect that while they know about these places, they don’t think these things are for people like them. The idea of giving children these summer experiences is incredibly valuable. Minority children need to be taken into worlds that are not theirs, but shown that nevertheless they need to know about them.”

It is now almost 35 years since the publication of *Utopia on Trial*, the seminal work on housing estates by Alice Coleman, a professor of geography at King’s College London. It condemned estates such as Broadwater Farm as “financial and human disasters that sear many lives with traumatic experiences”. As Clasford Stirling, the estate’s oldest “child”, puts it: “At the beginning it was a dream, but now a lot of people just want out.”

Yet many young children of this postwar housing experiment have a simpler dream. They just want the chance to be outside in the summer sunshine. They just want to play. After the recent “street play” event, the children headed home with smudged face paintings and cardboard boxes fashioned into spaceships. They were tired, but for once they were happy ■