

Sandwell Holiday Activities and Food Programme

Evaluation report: 2023–2024

April 2024

Abigail D'Amore with Emile Holba and Liz Pemberton



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



Introduction

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme was first launched as a pilot by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2018. It was designed to support disadvantaged families during the school holidays by providing healthy meals and enriching activities to young people. (Source: *Department for Education*).

Sandwell is the 12th most deprived borough in England, according to HMRC figures 35% of children in Sandwell are living in what is considered relative poverty. Mid-year population from 2021 indicated that there were 60889 of 4 years old - 16 years old living in Sandwell, this age group is the focus of the grant programme, with 21028 children and young people meeting the eligibility criteria to access HAF provision. (Source: *ONS 2021 census*)

The Sandwell HAF programme is a multi-stakeholder approach with activities planned and delivered by providers. The majority of providers are asset-based voluntary and community organisations or schools, often working with some of Sandwell's most marginalised and vulnerable families. It recognises that holiday periods for many families, particularly those who are living within challenging circumstances (poverty, domestic abuse, poor mental health for example) can be difficult and often traumatic times.

This report summarises emerging impact from Year 2 (April 2023 – March 2024) of the programme and forms part of a three-year evaluation process.

Evaluation methodology

This evaluation expands on an internal 2022-2023 report, strengthening existing findings and highlighting new evidence towards intended outcomes. It took place during the 2023-2024 financial year, incorporating three holiday periods (Easter 2023, Summer 2023, and Winter 2023/2024).

A Theory of Change was established during Year 1 in collaboration with the Sandwell HAF project team and reviewed at the beginning of Year 2. This was scrutinised by anti-racism consultant and evaluation team member Liz Pemberton and was discussed with providers. Children and young people (CYP) and families outcomes were written in the first person to make them more accessible.

Following this process 14 intended outcomes were agreed for the programme.

For children and young people (CYP):

- Our mental health is supported, we make memories we cherish, we feel happier, have fun and enjoy ourselves.
- Our physical health is supported: we enjoy eating tasty, nourishing food and being active.
- We are able to develop new skills.
- We have access to safe places to go where the adults look after us well.

For families:

- Our mental health (and our families) is supported. We create happy family memories through accessing activities.
- We have better access to safe spaces and trusted adults for our children.
- It's easy for us to get involved and we feel included.
- We know more about activities and services we can access for our children.



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



For Sandwell HAF programme and providers:

- The Sandwell HAF programme and providers have strong evidence for the impact of their work and effective monitoring systems.
- The Sandwell HAF programme and providers have created a sustainable offer for the future.
- The quality and variety of activities and services is improved.
- It is easier for partners working within communities to get involved and to access grants and funding.
- The Sandwell HAF programme and providers have developed a strong and appropriate training offer.
- The Sandwell HAF programme and providers have an improved understanding of supporting different cultures across the community.

The aim of this evaluation was to assess whether the intended outcomes had been achieved, whether any outcomes beyond the intended outcomes emerged, and whether the systems and processes behind the programme are proving effective.

The brief for the evaluation was to capture stories and experiences of the HAF programme for Sandwell families. It was clear from the outset that an ethnographic approach to evaluation would be most appropriate therefore as an evaluation team we immersed ourselves as much as possible in the culture of the communities, building trust and relationships – albeit within a limited timeframe.

Methods

The evaluation consisted of a mixed-methodology design containing some quantitative but mostly qualitative methods. The evaluation was grounded in the principles of the [Equitable Evaluation Framework](#), using the evaluation as a means of advancing equity. It took into consideration evaluator interpretation and bias and considered tools and approaches to make the evaluation methods accessible, equitable and inclusive. The evaluation ethics and values were also informed by the British Educational Research 2018 Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

Evaluation activity during Year 2 included: parent and carer survey data from Easter (213 responses), Summer (338 responses), Winter (85 responses) holiday periods; provider survey (40 responses); family interviews (12 parents and carers; 32 CYP); provider interviews (10); portrait capture with families (12); and Sandwell team reflective interview (3). It also involved informal visits and observations to HAF providers and HAF activities, and evaluation, critical friend work around the HAF conference in November 2023.

Alongside the interviews with families, a series of 12 portraits were created by award-winning photographer [Emile Holba](#). The portraits are designed to visually capture a perspective of the lives and stories of Sandwell families. Families were invited to decide where they would like the portraits taken, based on where they felt most comfortable. This was usually in the places where the HAF activity took place, including community centres and outdoor spaces. Families were involved in co-creating their own portraits. This collaborative process enabled families to make decisions on how the portraits should be taken. By being regularly shown how the images were presented on screen and having discussions about this, families could make subtle adjustments to the images. This resulted in the best quality portraits that were the most representative of the families involved. This portrait series will accompany the final iteration of the evaluation at the end of Year 3.



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council

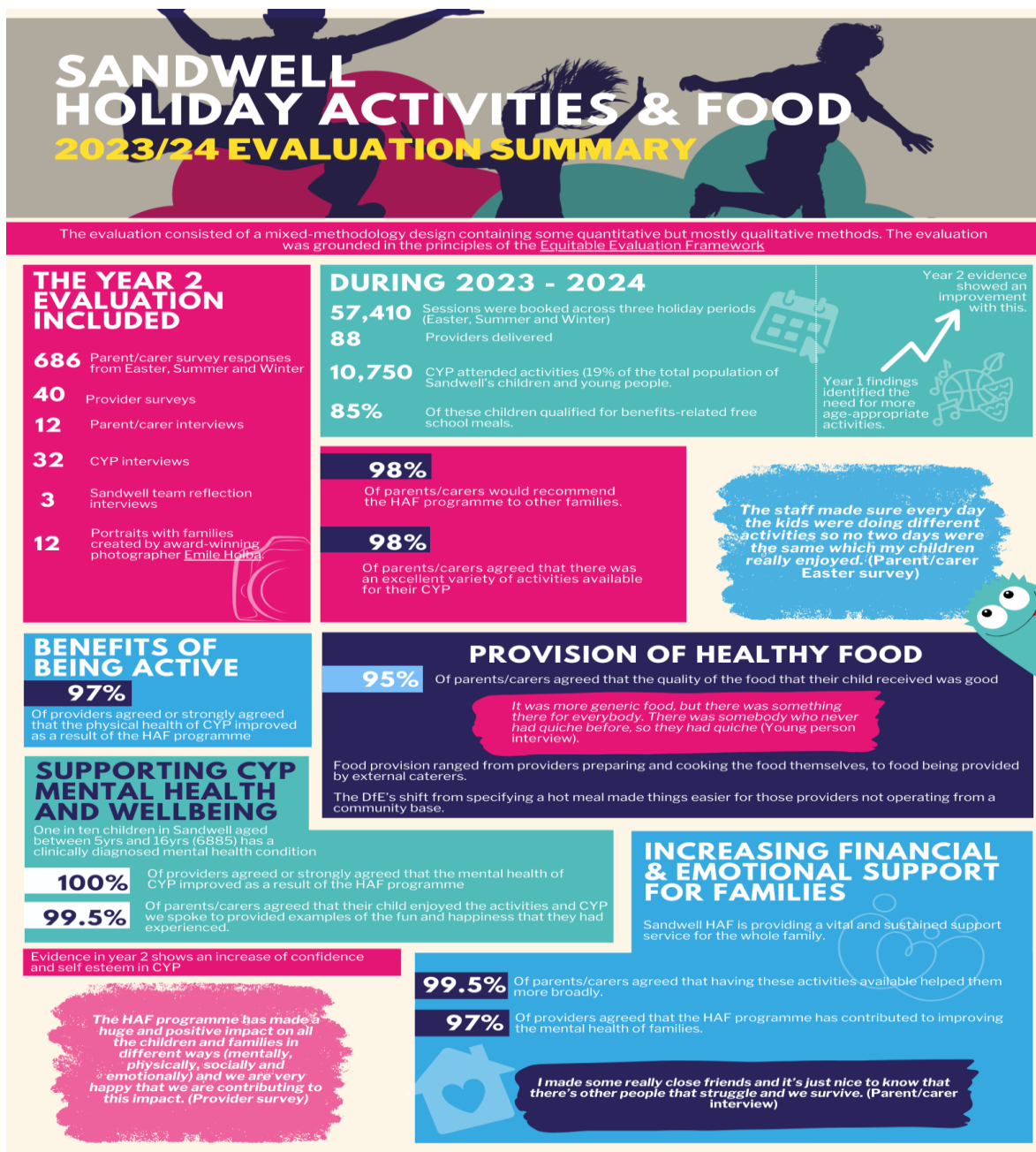


Data analysis and consent

All data were analysed at each data collection point. Survey and interview data were transcribed and mapped thematically against the intended outcomes. Data were then coded using a combination of inductive coding and concept-driven approaches based on emergent themes from Year 1. In some cases, families did not want themselves to be identified by association whatsoever, therefore CYP, parent/carer and all provider staff and organisation names have been anonymised.

A note on interpretation and bias

For the purposes of this evaluation I (Abigail D'Amore) was engaged as a consultant evaluator to lead on the evaluation, data collection and analysis and compile the report. While I took every effort to remain neutral, it is important to acknowledge that my judgments and interpretations are unconsciously informed by my positionality as a white middle-class female. It was critical for Liz Pemberton to be part of this team, as her positionality is as a black middle-class female who is from the Sandwell area. The Theory of Change process was led by Jennifer Raven, who is a white middle-class female, and the portraits captured by Emile Holba who is a white middle-class male. As a team, we were highly very aware of how we entered into spaces where we were different from families particularly regarding ethnicity, class, gender, disability and neuro-divergence.



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS

100%

Of providers agreed or strongly agreed that CYP developed new skills (including play) through the HAF programme

97.9%

parents/carers agreed that their child learnt something new.

I do think these activities create good habits, good future habits and children because I've definitely seen that in her. (Parent/carer interview)

INCLUSION OF CYP WITH SEND

During 2023-2024

756

SEND CYP attended HAF, which was an increase from the previous year

11

Specialist SEND providers with expertise and knowledge can accommodate profound and multiple physical & learning disabilities.

As a specialist SEND provider, we often get feedback from families that our events are the only opportunity they get to take their SEND and non SEND children to the same event and for them both to be able to fully participate and be safe. (Provider survey)

PROVIDING SAFE SPACES AND TRUSTED ADULTS

100%

Of providers agreed that the HAF programme provided supportive and safe spaces for families to leave their children

97.7%

Of parents/carers agreed that staff were approachable and friendly

DEVELOPING A SANDWELL HAF 'FAMILY'

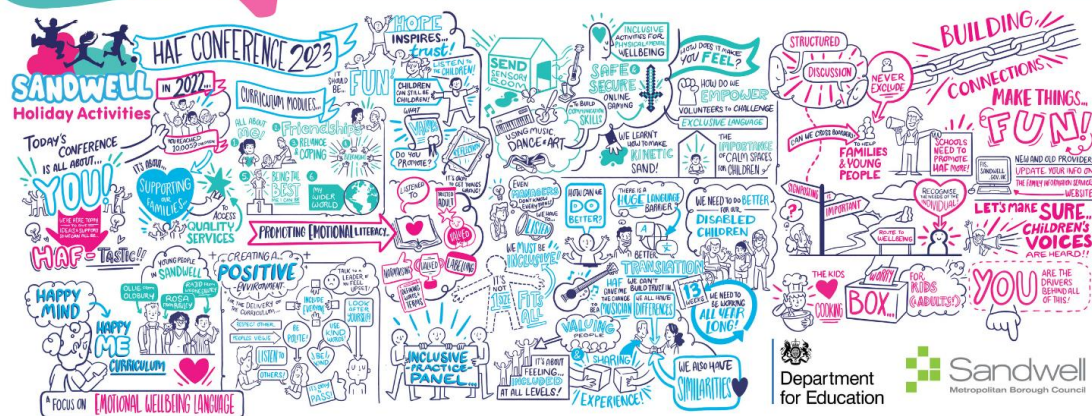
The network of providers delivering HAF activity has grown and strengthened as a community during 2023-2024. Much of the HAF provision is delivered within community spaces often led by staff who are representative.

A graphic illustrator captured the key learning points that emerged from the day



The Sandwell HAF team has facilitated platforms and spaces for providers to access support, information and to learn and share from one another.

Building on the Year 1 conference, the November 2023 HAF conference held at the West Bromwich Albion Football Club was considered a success. 120 front line HAF providers attended.



Department for Education

Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council

EXPENDITURE

Administrative Expenditure	£153,402.91
Programme Expenditure	£1,783,693.23
Other Expenditure	£66,639.87
TOTAL	£2,003,730.00

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

During 2023-2024 the Sandwell HAF team strengthened their marketing/comms capacity by for example implementing a social media campaign to raise awareness of activities, and utilising public health development workers more to get information shared.

SCHOOL TAKEOVER DAYS



32

schools took part



1,200

Children and young people reached

43%

Of families stated they learnt about HAF activities through their child/children's schools, highlighting the critical role of schools with signposting and engaging families.

WORKING TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

95%

Of providers agreed that the HAF has created opportunities to access and work with new families, often with many of these children accessing other provision on offer beyond the holiday periods.

Prior to HAF most of our work in the school holidays was with families that could afford to pay for camps. HAF has enabled us to reach families who would not be able to access those activities and deliver similar sessions for them. We have also been able to signpost to some of our other funded programmes that are targeted at such members of the community that we would not have otherwise been able to due to the relationships formed through HAF. (Provider survey)



SECTION 1: A breadth of activity and opportunity

I know it's going to benefit her in the long term. She's made friends that she'll have forever. She's had experiences that will improve her mental health and her physical health. She spreads the things she's learning and takes it with her, so there is no downside, there is not one downside. (Parent/carer interview)

The cost-of-living crisis in the UK disproportionately burdens low-income families, which becomes amplified during holiday periods. For children in these households, the impact can be profound, with families stretching already tight budgets and having minimal left to be able to afford holiday activities and outings. The strain of financial insecurity can take a toll on family dynamics, contributing to heightened stress and anxiety. The inability to participate in holiday experiences can cause feelings of social isolation and deepen the sense of being marginalised for Sandwell children and young people. Therefore the HAF programme is providing an increasingly vital provision to not only give children/young people the opportunity to have joyful, fun and physically healthy holiday experiences, but to provide financial and emotional relief to their families.

During 2023-2024 57,410 sessions were booked across three holiday periods (Easter, Summer and Winter) by 88 providers. A total of 10,750 children and young people (CYP) attended (19% of the total population of Sandwell CYP). Of these 85% (n=9,137) qualified for benefits-related free school meals.

98.4% of parents and carers would recommend the HAF programme to other families. Parents and carers consistently elaborated on the main reasons for this being: enjoyable and fun activities; effective staff; varied and high quality opportunities; social element including making friends; feeling safe and secure about CYP attending; and identifying improvements in their CYPs' confidence and overall mental health and wellbeing.

Effectiveness of the activities

97.8% of parents and carers agreed that there was an excellent variety of activities available for their CYP, both within each providers' programme and across all Sandwell provision. In Year 2 activities highlighted as being enjoyable for CYP included (but are not limited to): creative arts (arts and crafts, dance, music); sports (boxing, multi-sports, football, dodge ball, games); food related (planting and picking fruits and vegetables, cooking, smoothie making, food tastings); animal care (horse riding, animal shows); trips (examples given include laser tag, beach; trampoline park; zoo); cultural activities (theatre and pantomime shows, cinema); sensory activities (parachutes; sound buttons, bubbles); indoor play (board games, lego, gaming consoles); outdoor play (park visits); workshops and talks from experts (magic school, talks from police); seasonal activities (egg hunts).

Families shared appreciation for the time and attention given to the planning of activities. Four-hour HAF activity sessions would typically involve a combination of free play, structured activity and a mealtime, usually child-led and tailored around individual CYPs' needs.

The staff made sure every day the kids were doing different activities so no two days were the same which my children really enjoyed. (Parent/carer Easter survey)

I felt happy because there was a lot going on and you were encouraged to do everything. (Young person interview)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



It was identified in Year 1 that there could be more age-appropriate activities, particularly for older young people, and there was evidence in Year 2 to indicate that the Sandwell HAF team and partners made improvements with this. This included specific activities targeted at 11+ year olds (for example school of rock, school of magic, youth-club based sports and leisure activities, boxing, weightlifting, gym) and providers being aware of including older young people in mixed-age group activities, often by encouraging peer leadership with younger children. This parent/carer shared the social benefits of having mixed age groups:

The kids tend to get a closer bond when they're all doing activities together. At school, they're all from different classes, so they don't see each other, but when they come here instead of them playing out in the street, they're here in a safe place where you know nothing is going to happen, where they're enjoying themselves. It's good for them to come here to communicate and get along. (Parent/carer interview)

Families would prefer the activities to be longer, or for more activities to be available:

Perhaps having a slightly longer day closer to a school day would be helpful. (Parent/carer Easter survey)

Participant stories #1

In this family from West Smethwick, the two older children attended a mixed age-group HAF provision that focussed on physically active games and outdoor activities. They explained how they made new friends, had 'amazing food' and enjoyed going on trips.

I haven't been on any trips like that before or anything.

The good thing about it is there's lots of kids, lots of different age groups, no matter how old you are you've got someone that you can talk to and also the staff here, they're really supportive.

Mum explained how keeping children entertained during the holidays is a challenge in the local area, and it provides her with some time to do jobs at home:

You just get bored in the house and nothing to do because everything is expensive, so the four of us would go somewhere there's no food, no spending money, how do you keep the kids occupied with people of their own age. I would definitely use it every holiday. I definitely can't wait till [my youngest] can start coming, she's 2.

All talked fondly of the leaders at the HAF, including young leaders and apprentices with a particular interest in sports leadership.

I think it works because they were like big kids with little kids, so they had someone to talk to that isn't an adult, that can relate to them and speak to them on their level. (Mum)

They learnt about being outdoors, nature, and shared interesting facts about wildlife:

I learnt facts about when I was feeding the ducks. The only reason seagulls are over them is because the humans keep on fishing all their food out of the sea, so that's why they are all over England. (Young person)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



We as parents and carers NEED MORE OF THESE ACTIVITIES available during school holidays.
(Parent/carers: summer survey)

Providers demonstrated how they are considering incorporating CYP voice and choice into their activities with examples of this ranging from CYP being proactively involved in planning and structuring activities, to providers directly making changes as a result of CYP feedback.

We do really heavily rely on feedback from kids. So we say right, today we did this, what do you think went well, what didn't go so well, we get that feedback collected back and then we're like, Okay, this is our core, this is what we know we got to do, but if we have to change it, we can change it. (Provider interview)

Engagement and enthusiasm

CYP were engaged in and enthusiastic about the activities, even if they didn't always directly participate (and providers were open to CYP watching, or interacting in their own way). CYP were motivated to attend the activities, with parents/carers reporting energy and excitement beforehand, not wanting to leave at the end, and asking to return to activities each day/across holiday periods. It was identified that this was often in contrast to their motivation to attend school.

Had a game trying to leave as my child said 'I dowe wanna put my coat on I'm staying here.'
(Parent/carers: Winter survey)

Of course we will come [to the HAF] again. We're never going to stop. (Young person interview)

CYP shared what they did at the HAF programme with their families, and in some cases brought home things that they had made (arts and crafts, cooking etc). Some providers explained that they proactively made sure CYP had something tangible to take home each week to encourage celebrating achievements with their families. This also extended to some CYP telling their teachers in schools about the holiday club.

At Easter they did crafts, so for the first time ever, I got things that they had made. They've never really made anything at school or brought it home, if they did they got crushed on the way home, so it was nice to have things that they've never made for me before.
(Parent/carers interview)

Fantastic activities and very friendly staff, my children couldn't wait to tell me all about what they had done and were excited to get back to the next session. (Parent/carers: Summer survey)

Broadening horizons, providing opportunities

As identified in Year 1, the Sandwell HAF programme has successfully provided many CYP with varied, quality opportunities and enrichment activities that they wouldn't have had access to otherwise. Some of the trips, and activities that fall outside a typical families budget (for example horse riding, theatre trips, outward bound) broadened horizons, increased cultural capital and created important childhood memories.

The other day he did drawing and he loves drawing, he got to do horse riding, he's got to ride a bike because he can't ride a bike, they had bikes here. The horse riding is something he



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



wouldn't have done. The one thing I did want him to do was the beach trip, I think all kids would want to go to the beach. (Parent/carer interview)

Benefits of being active

Parents and carers expressed general concern about the lack of safe and age-appropriate spaces (indoor and outdoor) for CYP to go during holiday periods. The Sandwell HAF programme therefore provided a welcome relief from holiday boredom, as without this provision CYP would mostly be confined to homes with screens to occupy them.

97% of providers agreed or strongly agreed that the physical health of CYP improved as a result of the HAF programme. This was achieved through activities such as structured and informal sporting activities/camps; indoor and outdoor play; playing in outdoor spaces (parks, gardens) as well as activities that weren't sport-related but were physically active for example mucking out horses and gardening.

CYP, families and providers shared examples of the positive impact of being physically active, notably increasing stamina, improved physical fitness and improving mental wellbeing.

You've got to stay healthy and have no heart diseases. (Young person interview)

Participant stories #2

This group of young people regularly attended HAF provision with a particular focus on sports and physical activities at their local community centre. They explained why this was important to them:

Sometimes kids just stay inside, they don't wanna go out but if you do this or make them come out because they've seen like it's fun and then they can come outside.

Because in the holidays nearly everyone just stays at home and that makes their like health go bad but if you go outside, keep playing sports just makes it better.

The provider explained that they observe a lot of low self-esteem, so they incorporate a particular focus on mental health and wellbeing through physical activity. This extends to families, and supporting and raising awareness of other services that are available to them.

This is a deprived area, low income, no jobs, no security, a lot of arguments in the family. And these are the things we're picking up. HAF does make a difference. This service, particularly for parents, as well as other siblings as well. The parents didn't just drop them off, older siblings did, and they were curious as to what they were learning from the other ones. (Provider)

Young people identify the difference between the adults at the HAF programme and their teachers at school:

They're much kinder here. Normally teachers shout sometimes. Yeah, but here they don't really shout that much at school they shout more. They make us feel welcome here. (Young person)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



Provision of healthy food

Having healthy, nutritious meals and education about nutrition remains at the heart of the HAF programme. As with Year 1, this ranged from providers preparing and cooking the food themselves, to food being provided by external caterers. The DfE 2023 guidance stated 'all providers must provide at least one meal a day (breakfast, lunch, or an evening meal) and all food provided at HAF clubs must meet School Food Standards. This was a shift from specifying a hot meal, which made things easier for some of those providers not operating from a community base and particularly those delivering sporting activities. In some activities, food preparation was an activity with the children, resulting in an increase in knowledge about different foods and food culture.

95.1% of parents and carers agreed that the quality of the food that their child received was good. CYP were able to share experiences of trying food that they hadn't tried before. There were also some examples shared by families of how their child's increased interest in and willingness to try healthy foods had a positive knock-on effect in the home environment, with parents and carers making changes to how they shop for and prepare food, and an increase in awareness and understanding about nutrition and healthy eating on a budget.

It was more generic food, but there was something there for everybody. There was somebody who never had quiche before, so they had quiche. (Young person interview)

A young lad was eating the zucchini, the courgette noodles and things you know, shovelling them in, the kid that wouldn't eat veg. And that's just wonderful to see and that's what we want, you know, feelings of abundance for them as well that there's enough food here for everybody, this is togetherness. (Provider interview)

During Year 2, providers demonstrated more awareness of and ability to adapt to different food cultures, including ways of storing and preparing food for example Halal. Some providers, particularly those who were able to prepare food on site, showed an increased commitment to creating food menus that reflected their diverse communities, contributing to a sense of belonging for all CYP.

What was interesting was a lot of the children, especially the ones that are from a Muslim background, before they get the food, they would ask the question, is this halal? Can we eat it? And these are kids at the age of like four or five that are questioning us, which I think is great, they're not just eating something that's just given to them. (Provider interview)

Every menu that we had, had a backup plan for vegan, which turned out that we didn't have anybody really, but we were there...we could easily adapt. (Provider interview)

As with Year 1 there was some dissatisfaction from a minority of families regarding the food, for example: children disliking the food; wanting more or bigger portion sizes and variety of food; and dietary needs not always being catered for. The Sandwell HAF team acknowledge that the food offer should always be a priority, not a bolt on, and that this is an ongoing area for improvement.



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



Participant stories #3

In some cases, families attend HAF activities together. These two friends from Oldbury each have children with additional needs, and it was important to them to find HAF activities where they could stay as parents and get involved in the activities together. They attended HAF provision at a market garden, and the process of tending to, picking, cooking, and eating food together was an enjoyable experience for all.

The sense of belonging created by the HAF provider, who has much expertise in working with SEND children and families, was critical to them all feeling at ease and like they could all be themselves:

It was just nice to be out and know that my kids can do what they want to as in activities and enjoy them. It was nice to stay, we always said we enjoy it more than the kids do, it's nice to see our kids be able to be their true selves.

A particular highlight was new and different healthy foods that they prepared and tried, which has had an impact into how they eat in the home environment.

It's good because [my son] doesn't like different foods and for me it's quite hard to get him to eat vegetables and fruit at home, we have to kind of like disguise everything whereas here because he's made it himself he ate it no problem, he wouldn't eat it at home but because he's chopped it himself, he'll even have extras. Whereas at home I have to cut it so tiny to hide it in his food because he won't eat it.



SECTION 2: Supporting children and young peoples' mental health and wellbeing.

The Sandwell HAF team and providers recognise the decline in children and young people's mental health, particularly since COVID. One in ten children in Sandwell aged between 5yrs and 16yrs (6885) has a clinically diagnosed mental health condition. 100% of providers agreed or strongly agreed that the mental health of CYP improved as a result of the HAF programme. 99.5% of parents and carers agreed that their child enjoyed the activities and CYP we spoke to provided examples of the fun and happiness that they had experienced.

It was just fun. (Young person interview)

My kids come back every time with big smile on the face and story to tell about how their day went. (Parent/guardian: Easter survey)

The HAF programme has made a huge and positive impact on all the children and families in different ways (mentally, physically, socially and emotionally) and we are very happy that we are contributing to this impact. (Provider survey)

Some of the activities are specifically designed with wellbeing in mind, for example mindfulness and self-regulation, play-based approaches, sensory activities, and regular time in the fresh air and outdoors. Providers often have a quiet environment established somewhere in the space (for example a separate room, a tent, a set of steps) for CYP that need to take a break.

We have found that working with the children through play and physical activity has made a small improvement [to children's mental health]. Children are pressured every day at school, and the holiday club environment allows them to be children. We do not allow gaming or the use of computers, so children are encouraged to develop social skills and work with each other. Many prefer to isolate themselves or not mix with each other, and staff have encouraged this to improve health and well-being. (Provider survey)

As a result, there were anecdotal examples given indicating improvements in wellbeing, and in some cases improvements in anxiety and depression. Several CYP were able to express their feelings either through talking to HAF leaders and staff, or self-expression through play or arts-based activities. CYP talked about some of the HAF activities being 'peaceful', 'calming', 'relaxing', and some providers shared that the HAF programme provided an escape from some of the challenges and issues CYP face in their home environment.

First time my child has attended camp. He really enjoyed his week and has helped with his confidence and anxiety. (Parent/carer: Summer survey)

Development of skills



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



100% of providers agreed or strongly agreed that CYP developed new skills (including play) through the HAF programme and 97.9% of parents and carers agreed that their child learnt something new. This included hard skills for example food preparation, sports-based skills, arts and crafts, musical instrument skills as well as soft skills such as teamwork and collaboration; resilience, respect and patience. Examples were also provided of CYP increasing and expanding their general knowledge and understanding in various areas, for example: animal care; nature and the local environment; healthy eating; planting and production of food; and widening understanding of other cultures and communities. Also some parents and carers mentioned CYP creating new habits and routines following HAF activity attendance – tidying up and being more organised for example.

I do think these activities create good habits, good future habits and children because I've definitely seen that in her. (Parent/carer interview)

We aim to give children the opportunity to learn new skills through learning how to play new games, experiencing new challenges or involvement in crafts, appreciating that even meeting new people and making new friends is a new skill set as well as improving self-esteem and raising their aspirations, and maybe even finding new hobbies or mindful/self-regulating activities. (Provider survey)

There is evidence of some CYP further developing their skills, knowledge and/or interest beyond the HAF activity. Examples given have included taking up a sporting or musical activity and HAF activity contributing towards a scouts badge. This is reflected in an increase in interest and attendance in other activities offered by providers beyond the HAF activity (see Section 5).



Participant stories #4

This group of friends were able to access music-based activities together and refine their band identity. It also helped them with confidence and social skills.

People can come together, it's somewhere for people to go, and they encourage you to perform as well, to get you on stage and to boost your confidence.

All our confidence has gone up being able to just play and practice in this space and playing for people.

It's definitely a fun thing to have as a hobby, because there's like no pressure on you to do anything, but they encourage you to build up your confidence and then try new things.

They believe that the largest barrier that young people face with attending activities is confidence, and presenting and performing your work in front of others.

Especially if you're coming alone, it's daunting making the first move to come somewhere that you don't know, you've never been to.

When we came in, I felt like we were shy although we had each it was a new place and had staff watching us as well. It's like once you step over the door it's alright.

They all access other School of Rock provision offered by the provider. The youth club leader explains how HAF provision has enhanced their broader offer:

So things like the HAF programme is fantastic for us, because then it gives us the opportunity to enhance our regular activities and develop a program that will attract maybe young people to our service or and young people who may not have attended some of our regular core provisions. So things like HAF offering us that opportunity to put that additional type of activity on, School of Rock changes completely what we do at [the youth centre] that week.

Social skills and friendships

98.7% of parents and carers agreed that their child socialised with others during the HAF activities. This included making new friends and playing with others. The impact of this was an improvement in social skills such as teamwork, collaboration, listening, turn-taking, sharing and empathy, and for some a significant increase in confidence with socialising and being able to verbalise or share their thoughts and feelings. For those activities that were situated in a secondary school, some parents and carers stated that this helped with the transition process to a new school environment.

It's really good for the kids, you know, to see new people, new kids, you know, they enjoy more and it's really good for the parents as well. (Parent/carer interview)

When most new children arrive to our camps they are shy and not wanting to be involved however, by the end we have them actively wanting to get involved and socially mixing with children from different schools. (Provider survey)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



For some CYP holidays can be isolating, where they may only socialise with their siblings or family members. Positive examples were given of the benefits of socialising with other CYP, including becoming less shy, having more awareness of others, making sure nobody was left out and developing peer leadership skills through older young people helping with younger peers.

Even like personal development as well, like engaging with their friends. Just communicating and doing activities with each other really had a positive impact on their mental wellbeing as well. It made them feel closer to home toward each other, it made them feel happier, positive about everything, that's the impact it had. (Provider interview)

Participant stories #5

This group of young people access youth provision at a centre within their predominantly Muslim community. The youth provision has been extended and enhanced during holiday periods as a result of the Sandwell HAF programme.

The young people described how they learnt many new things during the Sandwell HAF – including about different cultures, and arts, crafts and food related to that culture. Being among friends is particularly important to them and they felt included by the adults involved:

It's better than sitting at home and just chilling with your siblings. You got to go out and go with your friends and do stuff that you found fun. When we're like all with each other and we get to do something, it's really fun and you're just happy in that moment.

You get to meet new people as well like, I barely knew her now see her almost every day.

The adults try to get everyone included, like, they can tell if you're just sitting there alone.

The youth workers explained how some of the young people are experiencing bullying at school, but they feel safe at the HAF provision during the holidays and are in some cases able to open up to them – which they partly attribute to them being from the communities as well:

The kids who can't speak to their parents, they can speak to us. And personally being from the same background as the kids and having the same cultural relations and similarities and everything that's under the sun be as like, in our adult life, we can imagine ourselves as them. So they're literally like a bunch of mini us like our younger child. So it's like, almost helping them kind of helps us. And it's just nice. (Youth worker)

Confidence and self esteem

There is much evidence in Year 2 of increased confidence and self-esteem in CYP. This includes confidence in how they participate in a specific activity (i.e. a musical or sporting activity) as well as evidence of an aspect of personal growth, for example increase in self-efficacy and agency, decrease in shyness, becoming more willing to join in, and feeling confident to show their true selves and 'come out of their shell'.

All our confidence has gone up being able to just play and practice in this space and playing for people. The first week it was just to ourselves and they'd come and help us. (Young person interview)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



For others, the HAF has been a way of overcoming barriers and increasing resilience for example as this Mum shared:

She is scared of spiders and over the summer [the provider] had 'Creature Feature' come in and she held a tarantula. The guy knew she was frightened, but he pointed her out and said come on let's do this we're going to solve this, put your hand out flat and the tarantula walked over her hand and she still scared of spiders but she can say she's held one, it's a big step, but she's so proud of herself and I was so proud of her. (Parent/carer interview)

Some parents and carers provided examples of their children doing better at school since attending HAF, notably due to an increase in confidence.

Since starting with them he has grown in confidence and became much happier in joining in with other peers. He now has a love for football including going to watch WBA play home games. Can't thank them enough for all they do. (Parent/carer: Winter survey)

In Year 2 various examples were provided of CYP demonstrating increased aspiration as a result of the HAF, for example talking about hopes for the future, and being positively influenced and inspired by activities and/or leaders. One HAF attendee progressed to compete in the junior world weightlifting championships.

Especially with a handful of the girls that joined, they were very introverted, not very keen on speaking to them.....And now that girls, they've got the confidence, some having been asked to have like, 1:1's where they've expressed that they want to be better at communicating with other people. (Provider interview)

Participant stories #6

This young person attends a dance-based HAF activity, which also takes CYP on trips to the theatre and pantomime. Mum explains how important experiencing these opportunities has been for both of them, as it is not something she is able to afford.

I would not have been able to afford to send them to holiday activities over the summer. I had a great big drop in my money and I could not have done half the things that they've done and actually at the moment it's really tight so what they provide, it gives them something to do, I mean when you're 12 or 13 you don't really want to go to the park you want to be in a social environment.

The provider supported the family with gaining an autism diagnosis, and the HAF activity is now a space where her daughter can be herself and develop social skills, grow confidence and self-esteem.

I'm proud and it's so nice to see her starting to embrace who she is because she spent so many years hiding her autistic traits. She was very good at mirroring other people so you don't see it as much. For years I put all of her little quirks, and her personality and just saying 'it's just [young person]' and now we're seeing her for who she is and it's lovely to see and the [Sandwell HAF] has provided that. (Mum)

The daughter was able to express her aspirations for the future, including going to performing arts college and wanting to be the first autistic person to receive a Tony Award.

The children are welcomed in everyday at the start by the door. Even the staff are there for children who are having bad days they are given a lot of support all staff there really go out



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



there way. If there was an award for them what they do for all these children I would definitely nominate the club. (Parent/carer: Summer survey)

As a result, parents and carers feel at ease with leaving their children, and CYP were comfortable staying.

My children won't be left at any kind of club and get nervous in new surroundings but they made them feel welcome. (Parent/carer: Easter survey)

The role of HAF delivery staff has been articulated by CYP and families as sitting somewhere between teacher, family member and friend. Where staff have been effective it is usually due to; boundaries being set and understood; having a calm, patient, friendly, kind manner; being prepared to be child-led; being flexible and adaptable around individual CYP's needs; and having a democratic, fair and inclusive approach.

If there was an argument they'd make it like equal, so no one noticed, not biased and that. (Young person interview)

Many examples were provided of how CYP would open up to staff, either for a general chat or to share issues they may be experiencing.

They basically feel like friends, like not like workers. They're strict, no they're not strict, but they have boundaries type thing....And they understand if you have like problems. (Young person interview)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



Participant stories #7

Many of the Sandwell HAF provider leaders are also parents/carers whose children attend HAF provision as well. This family are based in a community centre who has received HAF funding for the first time this year, and have delivered a successful HAF programme for 40-50 children at a time building on existing holiday provision they had been running themselves.

We just do it because you want to do it. So we applied for the funding for the HAF and got it, which was amazing, so this year was our first year we delivered it with funding and not having to scrimp and scrape or beg and borrow, it's just been amazing. To be able to give the kids that extra opportunity and the chances to do stuff that we wouldn't necessarily have done.

Critical to their provision is building rapport with families and serving their community. The family supports others, including referrals to other Sandwell-based services, sourcing equipment and technology to help other families in digital poverty, and running wellbeing sessions for women.

Mum explains how one of her children has SEND needs and understands how difficult it can be to find somewhere to go in the holiday that's accessible, enjoyable and safe.

The last thing I want to do is just drop and leave him there, and then them not knowing his triggers or understand him or anything. Because that's not a nice experience. So we always do the phone calls beforehand, we do meet and greets, we offer phone calls or WhatsApp calls, so people know our faces. So it's building those relationships beforehand, before they even get to the door, the families are at ease. It's like a family, that's what we try and create. Everyone's welcome

Staff have often acted as positive role models, which can be beneficial for building healthy trusting relationships, and providing inspiration for CYP:

I've got staff who live in the area so they can have conversations with young people about what it's like to live in Sandwell, Tipton. It's key to have that kind of relatability with the young people, to kind of develop the relationships with young people. (Provider interview)

It's great that the people who work here know music, because if they didn't they would be kind of useless so having someone like [leader] who almost does this every single day of his life, it's amazing because it's just skillful. (Young person interview)

Providers have shared that some staff benefit as much from the HAF programme as the CYP do – it's an enjoyable experience for all where they can observe the positive outcomes for CYP:

One thing I would say is for anyone who is planning on working with HAF and doing what we do, I'd say go for it. Because it's one of those once in a lifetime thing, something you really have to enjoy and come and see for yourself, because words can only describe so much. The atmosphere itself will tell you how amazing it is. (Provider staff interview)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



Participant stories #8

These young people attended a 'School of Rock' as part of the Sandwell HAF provision at a youth centre. They explained that for them, as well as being able to hone their instrumental skills, they have formed a band and secured a gig at a Birmingham gig venue.

The HAF provision was a positive safe environment for them to be during the holidays, socialise with others and further their musical interests.

I use it as a safe space to get away from home where there's a lot of noise, not very friendly.

They both shared the impact of positive role models leading the activity, particularly seeing them overcoming resilience.

During the School of Rock, out of all the positives there is always the one negative and that's just being able to push it through and carry on when it happens, you never know how many people you will have coming, how many people are going to leave, so that brings on a lot of struggle and stress. But [the music leaders], they push straight through it all and they still make it possible. That leaves a great impact on myself and I think most of us, to show that you can still push through it even when it's stressful.

Through the HAF provision some of the young people were able to train in basic food hygiene certificates and help the centre serve refreshments as part of their warm hub.

We can volunteer and be the people to help run that so that's where that helps. In work a lot of workplaces want people with food and hygiene with all the requirements going on. To learn a bit more and to educate myself more is great.

Generating a sense of belonging

99.2% of parents and carers agreed that their child felt included at the HAF activities. CYP and their families often reported feeling a sense of belonging, which was usually as a result of the way HAF providers communicated with families and supported the individual needs of CYP. Parents/carers generally felt listened to, and like they were part of a community through HAF.

Examples were given of CYP being able to be 'their whole selves' during the HAF activities.

The people around me [made me feel like I fitted in] and how they greeted me made me feel welcome. (Young person interview)

The staff here are amazing, he's really taken a liking to J, he actually loves J and he doesn't normally connect with people. J[provider staff]... made [my son] feel that it is ok to be [himself], and I think when people are like that with him it puts him at ease immediately. (Parent/carer interview)

There were some negative experiences reported about provider staff members, and although these were few and far between any instance of a young person feeling demoralised or undermined by a



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



staff member is significant as they often led to CYP not returning. In these minority of cases the Sandwell HAF team became involved to support with resolving issues which included alternative provision brokered and additional training, development recommendations for providers.

Participant stories #9

The children in this family have attended various HAF provision at their local community centre, which has kept them active and engaged during the holiday periods.

My favourite game was dodgeball, people had to stay in corners for only 4 seconds in the box. There was a big circle in the middle and both sides, you had to move very quickly without getting hit, I won, it was so fun. (Young person)

They explained how they particularly liked the staff and the coaches leading the activity:

All of them were, they were nice....In school they are like, do this do that...here they don't really tell you what to do. they are nice to you, they don't shout

As a result of bringing her children to the HAF, Mum has found out about other provision offered by the provider, particularly ESOL training. She was able to access English and Maths classes while the children attended the holiday activity, and met other parents as a result. She explained how important this is for her:

My heart is full, they are really helpful so I'm really satisfied. It's really good for the kids, you know, to see new people, new kids, you know, they enjoy more and it's really good for the parents as well. So, first of all, they can have some free time, they see their kids enjoy more, and they meet new people. So obviously, parents also get happy, you know, so when they are at home, you know they get bored, to be honest, they have gadgets or these things or sometimes. So when you take them to the park, maybe the weather be not good so you can't take them outside every time so this is a good opportunity for the kids. I need extra help with my English and my Maths and they give you that extra time for that as well.

Inclusion of CYP with SEND

During 2023-2024 HAF 756 SEND CYP attended HAF, which was an increase from the previous year. Parents and carers of CYP with SEND shared how finding activities for their children during the holidays often proves challenging, but through HAF they have mostly been able to find activities that their CYP can either attend on their own, or as a family.

There's a kid called A. So his mom had kindly said to us, 'he's very antisocial, I need some respite, I can't cope'. So when he first came, he was a bit problematic. So it was almost as if he didn't want to be here, but then he didn't not want to be here. By day three, I remember he just came running up to me, gave me a massive hug and just say, 'I'm looking forward to tomorrow'. So for him, and for us, that was good. (Provider interview)

Providers who aren't SEND specialists have made reasonable adaptations to accommodate the physical and psychological environment (although challenges around this are noted in section 5) and



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



as a result many children with additional needs have been able to participate in activities alongside their peers and siblings.

We had a girl with cerebral palsy and her mom and dad literally cried because their daughter was able to come, sit at the table with the other kids take part in the different activities, she's like, unless she was able to literally get her to a specific one she's not been able to do anything. We obviously have different heighted tables, different activities on ground level, standing up, different games. (Provider interview)

There also are 11 specialist SEND providers who have the expertise and knowledge to be able to accommodate profound and multiple physical and learning disabilities.

It was particularly beneficial for families when siblings of children with SEND were able to access the same activities. One of the main benefits of this was that it provided an opportunity for parents and carers to spend quality time with their other child/children while they were secure in the knowledge that their child with SEND was being cared for.:

As a specialist SEND provider, we often get feedback from families that our events are the only opportunity they get to take their SEND and non SEND children to the same event and for them both to be able to fully participate and be safe. (Provider survey)

it gives you an opportunity to spend time with [my other son] as well because obviously a lot of time is spent on [son with SEND]. (Parent/carers interview)



Participant stories #10

For this family, being able to attend an activity that could be accessed together by both of their children, one with SEND, was a particular highlight of the HAF.

They had instructions for everybody, it was quite spacious for her, she was in her wheelchair which you could use. She was given the chopping boards, cutting things and so she was participating, she was making the pizza dough. So she was getting involved with everything, as much as she could, so she was there when we made the pizza, she was by the table mixing things. (Parent)

It was good, and also we took like, some videos of the cutting and making so I could get my scout badges, because like that's part of it. And making them from scratch, cooking and eating what you've cooked yourself. Yeah, I think that was pretty good. (Elder sibling)

The parents felt that the HAF provider met both of their children's needs in different ways, including travelling to the HAF activity.

They both have different choices, she wants to be outdoors, he wants to be indoors so for me it's that when we go there she can be outdoors. She likes to follow the bus so she was coming on the bus with us and that was a fun part for him and he likes to travel as well. So they were both coming together, we were missing the bus and running after the bus and that was all part of the fun.

The family explained how the approach, kindness, care, inclusivity of the staff was critical to them all getting involved and feeling part of the community.

The holidays, they're socialising, meeting new friends, doing something. It gives you that boost, I'm part of this, I'm doing something, we've got some happy memories. That's what you need over the holidays; it makes for happy times.

Some families however felt that their child's needs weren't met, for example with the food provided and with finding their options to book for children with SEND were limited. Providers experienced difficulties with families not fully disclosing children's needs at booking, meaning that upon arrival providers weren't always able to take children if the capacity or staffing wasn't sufficient.

The range of options available for children with complex and high support needs are very limited and this means some vouchers go unused. (Parent/carer: Winter survey)

There were some frustrations this summer as the number of children with SEND, and the severity of their needs has increased and most parents did not share at registration, or on follow-up calls that their children had additional needs. This meant that staff were not fully prepared and adaptations, which might have been possible had we been informed before the booked session, were not made. (Provider survey)

There also is an accountability issue with providers – they don't want to commit to taking children where they aren't confident that they have the capacity to support their needs, especially where 1-



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



to-1 support is needed. While the Sandwell HAF team are committed to finding ways (i.e. by sourcing specialist support or equipment) to ensure individual children can be accommodated, this support isn't always accessed. More work is needed in this area, including benchmarking what quality provision is, and making sure providers know how the Sandwell HAF team can support them.

Our venue is at capacity and we have had to direct parents to other organisations who are delivering HAF. Parents may not be able to afford to take their children further afield so this may impacted families. We have had 5 families contact us to see if we can provide SEN support which unfortunately we are unable to do due to capacity and staffing levels.
(Provider survey)



SECTION 4: Increasing financial and emotional support for families.



It is becoming increasingly evident that the Sandwell HAF is providing a vital and sustained support service for the whole family. 99.5% of parents and carers agreed that having these activities available helped them more broadly. It offers something joyful, playful and positive that can't be accessed elsewhere, and it contributes to improving overall quality of life for families during holiday periods.

Because the children now rely on it, it's part of the community, something that we know that our children are going to enjoy going to. It's now recognised that that's what happens in the holidays, 'right it's half term we go to the HAF programme'. And a lot of work and effort and time has been put in to do this so just to take it away would be a real shame because it does work and it does benefit the kids and they do enjoy it. (Parent/carer interview)

I hope HAF never stops because it's absolutely integral to everyone's life. I wouldn't know what I would have done with my children if they hadn't had this because they would've just been at home. You know or heaven forbid possibly out causing chaos because I see children doing that, and I don't want them to be doing that. I don't want them to be the child that gets brought home by the police, it just gives them something to do that's not causing trouble for anyone else. (Parent/carer interview)

Relieving financial pressures

Families described how the HAF programme has provided activities and opportunities for their CYP that they wouldn't be able to afford:

I work, I try and get him out, he sees just 10-20 kids in the six weeks holiday. If you try and take them away for 2 weeks in the big week holiday you've got to find a lot of money, even if you've got a well paid job with two people, it's hard. To know that I could've just dropped him off and that he was occupied it really did make a difference. (Parent/carer interview)

Low income working families are often on the cusp of criteria for attending HAF, depending on their situation, and at providers and the Sandwell HAF team discretion 15% of participants can be outside of the eligibility criteria. For some, the HAF has provided a financial 'lifeline':

I have three jobs and I don't really take time off so it's obviously a lifesaver as in childcare for me, but at the same time it's not just any childcare, it's not a babysitter or childminder it's exposure to different kinds of cultures out there that maybe others take for granted. And it's a pleasure to know that while I'm working that she can go to somewhere that I then haven't got to find separate expenditure for and that she's having all those positive experiences. (Parent/carer interview)

For others the provision of meals and food reduces some of the financial pressure of needing to finance additional meals for CYP during the holidays. In some cases, providers give leftover food to families, food hampers, or invite families in to eat with the children:

One mom had said to us, especially with the cost of living, she couldn't remember the last time she was able to sit at the table with her kids and have food. (Provider interview)

Respite and emotional wellbeing

97% of providers agreed that the HAF programme has contributed to improving the mental health of families. As noted in Year 1, it provides a break for parents and carers, which is particularly valued by



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



single parent families; families of children with additional needs, or families with multiple siblings; and it provides reassurance to families that their CYP are occupied, safe and happy, often while learning and experiencing something new and socialising. This helps removing feelings of guilt that some families experience, provides a routine and structure to lengthy holiday periods:

The HAF programme, definitely [helps] because the holidays and especially money and the cost-of-living, because we would just be sitting in the house and the kids are going 'are we going anywhere today'. If it's raining or anything like that, you can't even go to the parks as they are just all torn down and things like that so it's giving them the opportunity.
(Parent/carer interview)

Providers shared how many families that they work with are experiencing mental health issues themselves, or are in challenging circumstances in the home (domestic violence and addictions for example), and therefore the HAF can provide momentary respite for all:

I've got anxiety myself and over Christmas, I spiralled, it was really bad and knowing that they had somewhere to go that was their own gave me time to have a mental break. They are not demanding children, don't get me wrong but there's some times I just want to be alone with myself, and they've got somewhere to go and it was nice. (Parent/carer interview)

Holidays can be isolating times for families. Bringing CYP to the HAF activities therefore was often an important moment for parents and carers to see other people. Parents and carers shared how they had met new people as a direct result of the HAF, helping them feel more connected and supported.

You got some people are sitting at home and they've got absolutely no one to speak to or they've got to go to work, no one to care for their children and they know that they can bring them here and they'll be looked after and give them a little bit of a break so it definitely helps, of course it does. For some people it's just to speak to somebody else so it's an excuse sometimes to come and interact and the kids to come and interact at the same time.
(Parent/carer interview)

I made some really close friends and it's just nice to know that there's other people that struggle and we survive. (Parent/carer interview)



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



Participant stories #11

Having opportunities such as horse riding being available through the HAF provision has been important to this young person's Mum, especially seeing her daughter so happy, engaged and enthusiastic as a result.

There's so many different experiences that she's had that would've cost me a fortune and you really want your child to have the most experiences, but you haven't got the resources to do it yourself, so it just makes me feel really mentally a good conscience as a parent giving her full exposure to all these things that she generally is interested in as well and I can offer that to her because of the scheme.

The presence of horses at the HAF provision was a positive focus, and a way of overcoming shyness

On a scale of 1 to 10 it was a good 10 because I don't usually make friends, because I'm quite shy when I come to new places and meet new people, but this time I thought that there was just something about me that meant I could just talk, and because they were smiling at me.

She was able to share positive memories made at the provision:

My friends were giving a horse an apple and it's snorted on her, so it was a memory for me and it made me laugh and my friend.

The mum explained how staff were there to reassure both her and her daughter:

She's super shy, but I felt that when she came here it was different. It was the greeting and it was the nice staff and it was the way you were treated when you came in all the information was given, I got to stay with her for five minutes before having to leave and they were still checking in on you on the way out asking if you were alright, if you had any questions and then I just saw her chatting to friends.

I was just really happy to come back and have her run at me, but then go back to the table because she wanted to finish off her arts and crafts. I couldn't actually take her out of the building, even though it had finished because she didn't want to leave.



Families sharing activities together.

Some of the HAF activities were also open to parents and carers to join in with their children. This was welcomed by some families, particularly those with children with SEND who struggle to find activities that they can access together as a family.

My son and me we have a wonderful time spending together, we really enjoy these events so glad we have lovely people like [provider staff] holding these event, big Thankyou.
(Parent/carers Easter survey)

In some cases families took knowledge they had learnt back into the home environment, for example this parent carer shared how attending the HAF with their child informed their knowledge about batch cooking, which resulted in a positive impact on their budgeting and general approach to healthy eating:

What I did since coming here is I've done a lot of batch cooking. Like I've never brought an aubergine before in my life but after coming here I got one, there's things you don't think of buying....To batch cook like spaghetti bolognese or something that would be so expensive with the meat but now I add vegetables like carrots and aubergines that I would never have done before and I was able to make so much more. Before I would've just used sauce out of a jar now I make it myself. It's like it bulks it up and makes it go further but it also gives you those vitamins or whatever. (Parent/carers interview)

Strengthening referral pathways and support mechanisms

97% of partners stated that they had been able to help families to navigate towards other support and services as a direct result of them bringing their children to HAF activities and 95% of providers agreed or strongly agreed that the HAF programme has increased families' awareness of other services and opportunities available to them. During 2023-2024 this has included (but is not limited to): early help intervention; English language and maths lessons; food banks; cost of living and financial support; housing; debt management; social services; drug, alcohol and tobacco addiction services; mental health and wellbeing; energy and water saving companies; domestic violence; parenting courses and support; support for parents of children with SEND; digital poverty for example sourcing laptops; welfare rights; Citizens Advice; health services; CAMHS; benefits and housing.

There were people helping you fill out forms going through everything, through coming here I actually saved 60% off my water bill and then I've got someone coming out to see if I can save on my heating. (Parent/carers interview)

An important aspect of this has been ensuring providers are aware of other services, and training staff to know how to have conversations with parents and carers who may be taking the first step to asking for help.

When we talk about mental health, we're not just talking about one particular area, we're talking about housing issues, benefits, school issues, health issues, it is a combination. And unfortunately it's a vicious circle....So how do they get out of that cycle? We do what we can. Yeah, yeah, providing the best service that we can. (Provider interview)

Having engagement from wider council and community services, for example early help, means that the HAF is becoming an important link in the referral pathway, particularly for those families needing



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



statutory or social care support, with the anticipated benefit of this being a reduction in referrals into targeted services.

Participant stories #12

For these two families, having positive, varied activities for their children to access during the holiday is important for all of their mental health. Both Mums felt safe leaving their children at the HAF, which is reassuring for them and the children.

Because they've got so much community spirit within themselves that shows, they've got all the time in the world for the children. I know that if something was to happen it would get dealt with in the correct manner, but there's never really any problems like that, they've got loads of time for them so I think that makes the kids feel a little bit settled.

Both Mums also enjoy coming to the HAF activity, as the community centre in which its based provides an important support and social network, particularly for Mums. They have both accessed other services and learnt of other opportunities as a result of bringing their children to the HAF.

It's becoming more and more women coming together so that's helped. [The provider has] helped women so [we've] gone along with other groups like relaxation groups, gym memberships, exercise classes, things like that. I had the energy people come round with money management, computers, everything else that we needed, we can go to [the provider] and she will go above and beyond to find some sort of solution.



SECTION 5: Developing a Sandwell HAF 'family'



The network of providers delivering HAF activity has grown and strengthened as a community during 2023-2024. Much of the HAF provision is delivered within community spaces often led by staff who are representative, or who have deep understanding, of the communities that they are serving. Having hyper-local provision is one way of removing a barrier to families:

A lot of them are really local. I haven't often had to worry that it's something that I've not been able to get to before when I wasn't driving we would catch a train or a bus, but they're easy to get to literally on our doorstep. (Parent/carer interview)

During 2023-2024 providers further enhanced their understanding of Sandwell's communities. This includes culturally diverse communities including newly arrived families and those who have experienced forced migration, and increased awareness of the inequalities surrounding intersections of race, ethnicity, disability, gender and class. This has often led to adaptations around food preparation and culture (for example Halal) and awareness of implications on CYP of religious festivals and traditions (for example Ramadan). The Winter HAF has been renamed from 'Christmas HAF' to reflect a shift in understanding of inclusion at Sandwell Council grant-assessment panel level and a Google Translate option has been added to the booking form to reduce language barriers for families.

Gave me a lot more awareness about halal food, not thought about before. There are a lot of Muslim children attending. Finding out about different levels of it, really interesting. So when planning meals, I took that into account. Lots of internet research and asking parents who come to session already. I have a lovely group of parents who I can ask, they help advise whether I'm doing things right or wrong. (Provider interview)

Growing a community

The Sandwell HAF team has facilitated platforms and spaces for providers to access support, information and to learn and share from one another. This includes quarterly meetings for providers; training and development; one-to-one support and regularly sharing and signposting information about providers via the HAF social media. The result of this is fostering a sense of ownership, belonging and community among providers.

From inception, we've had the opportunity to feed in through, steering groups and learning forums all the way up until HAF went live, we're kept up to speed by our colleagues. (Provider interview)

This network has also provided a way of providers learning about one another's activities, strengths and expertise. This has proved important not only for providers to be able to signpost families to other provision, but to reduce the sense of 'competition' with a focus instead on working together to improve the quality of life for all Sandwell CYP. Providers working alongside the Sandwell HAF team has led to the development of robust policies and procedures related to HAF, and to an extent has enabled providers to enhance their individual offers.

Support from the Sandwell HAF team



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



The conference was an important moment to come together, celebrate achievements, and challenge one another to do better, particularly around inclusive practice. Delegates fed back that they would be reconsidering how to make spaces and activities fully inclusive, and better signpost families to other providers. There was also an increased confidence among providers around how they were delivering HAF, and learning from the conference was cascaded to others in provider organisations. Providers felt it was a valuable opportunity to network, meet new people and learn from each other. Actions that were implemented as a direct result of the conference included: Google translate being added to the booking system; providers arranging meetings with families of children with SEND; Happy Mind Happy Me provision continued to be embedded; and HAF application forms and guidance being updated to improve equitable access.

Towards equitable access for providers

During 2023-2024 88 organisations received funding with an average grant award of £6,203 (Easter), £19,267 (Summer) and £4,924 (Winter). As with Year 1 one of the main challenges reported by providers was the short timeframe between the funding being allocated and the start of the holidays. This process is reliant upon the release of the grant determination letter from the Department for Education, and therefore beyond the Sandwell HAF team's control. This short planning phase impacts how providers recruit and train staff and volunteers; book activities and trips; and plan and prepare for food.

Some felt that the application process could be more streamlined.

The application process is hard, but I do understand that it needs to be rigorous to ensure quality and safeguarding. (Provider survey)

The application process is straight forward though sometimes the deadlines are a bit tight and the amount of writing/work required for the bids is quite a bit for the timeframe. (Provider survey)

Marketing and communications

During 2023-2024 the Sandwell HAF team strengthened their marketing and comms capacity by for example implementing a social media campaign to raise awareness of activities, and utilising public health development workers more to get information shared.

43% of families stated they learnt about HAF activities through their child/children's schools, highlighting the critical role of schools with signposting and engaging families. 27% found out about activities through the HAF website (and the % of families stating the HAF website for sourcing information increased each holiday period), with 14% via word of mouth, 7% through marketing material in local communities, and 5% via Facebook. Some families shared that they told friends and family members about the HAF provision and stated that they felt many still aren't aware that this is available for them.

There has been a lot of interest by families word of mouth and has resulted in new young people being involved. (Provider survey)

During 2023-2024 there were also 22 school 'takeover' days where 32 providers reached 1,200 CYP and the Shape Youth Summer Festival on 12th July 2023 (<https://www.justyouth.org.uk/shape/>) which providers felt were effective ways of promoting the opportunities and offers directly to CYP and their families:



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



[The Shape Festival] helps us develop our offer and co-produce it a bit more because you'll come across someone and they say, Oh, I can't do that, because of.... so you find a solution or, I'd love to do that but.... and you find a solution, so that's always really good. (Provider interview)

Booking E-voucher system

In Winter 2022 a new 'e vouchers' booking system was introduced, whereby schools assigned eligible families codes which were issued on an agreed date by the central HAF team to all those children identified by the school to be eligible for HAF support. These codes could then be redeemed on the booking system to reserve activities. 92.3% of parents and carers agreed that they found it easy to book activities with 88.5% of parents/carers agreeing that communication about the e-vouchers system was clear.

I feel very lucky because it was easy, easy to use your code log onto the HAF website, and then choosing it was really simple. I haven't had any trouble, I've helped my friends from school do it as well. (Parent/carers interview)

I think it worked really well, for me it was quite straightforward, quite simple to use. I can literally log on every day and say, Oh, I've got 2 messages, I've got 10 bookings, 2 spaces, I can do a bit of promotion saying I've got a couple of spaces left. (Provider interview)

However there have been barriers reported about the entire process notably language, illiteracy, lack of technical knowledge to be able to complete forms online, digital poverty, schools not providing codes to families with enough time to book the activities and confusion over the location of the voucher codes.

90% of the time, a lot of the parents here as well, struggle to use the Internet. I feel like some of the parents found it difficult to comprehend. So I think, next time for improvement, like the voucher to be sent home or something like that, rather than the school. (Provider interview)

A key issue is that parents who aren't literate they don't understand whether they've been sent the code or if they have they don't know how to then access the code and so they're coming, they're bringing their children along without a code. (Provider interview)

Technical problems with the booking system were also shared for example: needing to keep on filling in the same information each time; not being able to find codes; vouchers not working; problems with logging on to see bookings and providers taking too long to accept cancellations meaning that other activities couldn't be booked; address where activities took place not matching what was in the system/taking place in a different place to where advertised; parents not being able to find out information about what children should take to the activities. However reports of this decreased in frequency as the year progressed, indicating that system teething troubles were resolved over time.

I found the voucher booking system/logging in clunky and frustrating, having to get an email link to re-enter each time. Everyone got their vouchers at different times so didn't get a fair go at booking. (Parent/carers Easter survey)

Some providers voiced concerns that barriers with the booking system may put families off altogether:



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



I think a lot of the parents probably are making assumptions about what they can and can't do so they just don't come. Whereas actually that if there was more dialogue, which hopefully will come with time as they get used to the offer, whether that's us providing or someone else, but as they get used to the sort of HAF offers locally that that will change, I hope. (Provider interview)

Providers have demonstrated much commitment to supporting families with accessing the booking system, reflected in 86.1% of parents and carers agreeing that they were able to get help with completing the booking if they needed it and 87.8% of parents and carers agreeing that support they received was helpful and issues were resolved.

Obviously at first I was a bit like 'oh how am I gonna go about it' but you just get the vouchers emailed and then you go through and do your code, but [provider] does always give us a heads up and let's us know if it's getting booked out, she gives us a heads up so we get on and book it. But you can just come here and if there's spaces she'll speak to you and book you on, once you know it's quite easy. (Parent/carer interview)

This additional layer of critical support to ensure all families can access the system does require resource (time, capacity, expertise) within providers, which isn't necessarily covered by the funding.

Bookings to attendance conversion

As with Year 1, one of the biggest challenges for providers remains non-conversion of bookings, with a considerable number of bookings during this period not resulting in attendance. This was particularly noticeable during the 23/24 Winter HAF, where the timing of the winter holiday (i.e. very little lead-up to Christmas for some families) meant there wasn't a full week where providers could operate. Attendance issues are also despite measures the Sandwell HAF team have implemented for example stressing importance of cancelling places, warning non-attendees will not be able to book activities again, encouraging providers to over-book activities and to programme one-off days instead of courses etc – but the problem has continued. This can result in food waste, and providers incurring costs unnecessarily for example staffing and venue and equipment hire.

I suppose the only issue that we have, and I would say through HAF is that when we have people booked on to the programs and then don't turn up, because it's a free activity it's quite easy for either a young person or a parent to decide not to turn up, not to let anyone know, or whatever it is, that is the only kind of negative thing that's happened to us as a service and I know from my colleagues who deliver other HAF activities who've had similar issues. (Provider interview)

Speculative reasons for this that the Sandwell HAF team and providers have shared include: less value being placed on free activities; illness (particularly during Winter); families over-booking and then on the day children/young people not wanting to attend, or parents and carers not wanting to or being able to leave the house.

Refining monitoring systems



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



The monitoring systems in place have been reviewed and refined over time by the Sandwell HAF team with most providers sharing they find this straightforward and flexible. The Sandwell HAF team have noted a marked improvement in quality of the monitoring information since Year 1 with providers having policies, procedures, paperwork and a lead person on site during visits. Providers have reported that they would like more information fed back (for their own records) on the CYP attending the activities (gender, ethnicity, total numbers of children etc), and others that they would like to better be able to understand their impact – feeling that the monitoring systems in place don't always do that:

The only downside for us as an organization, we don't, because we're so busy doing everything I can't capture that engagement. We just get on with it and I think I don't give I don't I don't give my organisation enough credit for that. (Provider interview)

Others feel like some of the information asked for could be sourced elsewhere, saving providers time with finding the information:

Monitoring, there's a lot of the statistics that are asked for they already have – for example how many were primary/secondary, which HAF already had as the parents had to sign up through their site, whereas we had to go through each register, wasn't a database. (Provider interview)

Some provider organisations explained that they collect large amounts of evidence in folders (photos, descriptions of activities, quotes from parents/carers etc) and they're not sure how to use this.

There has been a 26% increase in the number of responses to the survey from parents and carers between Year 1 and Year 2, and providers have shown they are willing to directly respond to feedback and make changes as a result.

Towards sustainability: organisational growth

During Year 2 an increased number of providers have shared examples of how involvement in the HAF has helped them to grow as organisations. 95% of providers agreed that the HAF has created opportunities to access and work with new families, often with many of these children accessing other provision on offer beyond the holiday periods.

Have had quite a few come long to our sessions that we run beyond the HAF project, have seen those children migrate. Maybe a dozen, keeping developing skills that way, general fitness and friendship. (Provider interview)

Prior to HAF most of our work in the school holidays was with families that could afford to pay for camps. HAF has enabled us to reach families who would not be able to access those activities and deliver similar sessions for them. We have also been able to signpost to some of our other funded programmes that are targeted at such members of the community that we would not have otherwise been able to due to the relationships formed through HAF. (Provider survey)

Providers have shared how the HAF marketing and communications (website, social media promotion etc) has helped increase knowledge and awareness of their general services, and they



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



have been able to expand their mailing lists of interested families to activities and in some cases geographical reach.

We host our HAF at school venues where we work but other children attend these from other schools where we would not have engaged with previously. (Provider survey)

But what's great is that the website, if it is kept up to date, so I always say to the staff and to our colleagues, here we are, here's the QR code, we're on the HAF providers website, check us out. (Provider interview)

Increased attendance of adults to services

Some families have been able to access community venues they weren't aware existed due to bringing their children and young people to the HAF. For those providers who deliver services for adults as well as children, this has often led to families attending other services – ESOL provision, wellbeing support, leisure activities for example as well as providers being able to signpost them to other support services beyond their organisations (as noted in section 4).

It's grown my ESOL provision. Also, through the families that I've met, and the families that come and access our services, we've kind of done feedback sessions they wanted, like the women wanted a women's only health fitness thing. So we managed to go out and get the funding for that. I think we as an organisation, we have grown from the HAF definitely. (Provider interview)

We did a course with [provider] which was really good. It's just about if you've ever been in situations not necessarily bad relationships, but if you've ever feeling down confidence, affirmation group, coping mechanisms coping with stress if you've had a bad weekend you go every Monday and talk about the weekend it's not just us its friends and other women as well. If they've got low self-esteem and low confidence when the community comes together, it's like a women's group together and all supporting each other, it makes you feel a bit more better. (Parent/carer interview)

Workforce expansion and development

Through the HAF programme many providers have expanded their workforce by recruiting and training new staff and volunteers – often directly upskilling community members. Volunteers to the HAF programme are often parents and carers, or in some cases young people who had attended the HAF themselves.

I've had one lady who is actively a volunteer for us, now. She's joined us as a volunteer, then she'll be actually joining us on the HAF this time. (Provider interview)

Training and development

Professional development and training is an important part of organisational growth as it results in there being more trained people on the ground. 84% of providers felt that the HAF programme has an appropriate and relevant training programme for providers, with 11% being unsure and 5% disagreeing. Many providers offer statutory training (safeguarding, health and safety, food hygiene; first aid) for staff, and providers can access training that is offered through the Sandwell HAF team for example disability awareness. There also has been training offered on the e-voucher system and grant application system. Providers report that training is broad, varied, accessible and meets their needs.



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



The training content is specifically designed keeping in mind the unique requirements of the HAF programme. This ensures that providers and practitioners are well-equipped to handle the specific challenges and opportunities that come with running holiday activities and food provisions. (Provider survey)

We've supported the running of Makaton classes, Autism awareness training, safeguarding, all of the qualifications that we feel the staff will need to be able to provide the best services that we can and do what we need to do. (Provider interview)

Others however would value more training, feeling that they are increasingly delivering activities for CYP with a wide range of individual needs by relying on pre-existing skills and knowledge of staff.

I think we could do with more training in regards to autism, first aid and food hygiene. (Provider survey)

Legacy and continuity

Despite the indicators of organisational growth through the HAF, there remains concern among providers that the HAF programme is not fully sustainable without the DfE funding, especially as the programme is only just beginning to become established within communities. Only 47% of providers agreed that the HAF programme is sustainable, with 42% being unsure and 11% disagreeing. There is unanimous agreement that families would be unable to pay for holiday activities, even at a heavily subsidised rate. Providers themselves are suffering from cost-of-living increases, with some sharing dramatic significant rises in rental costs and food costs during 2023-2024.

It isn't cheap to deliver high quality support co-designed with attendees and parents - I hope very much the government continues to fund it. (Provider survey)

While HAF delivers outcomes that far outweigh the initial financial outlay if a price could be attached to the experiences of the families who utilise it, if that funding doesn't exist then HAF doesn't exist. Without knowing what funding will be available in the future the answer is unclear. (Provider survey)

Others feel that there is increased competition for the funding, with some un-substantiated concerns that not all organisations receiving funding are fully committed to wider outcomes for children, young people and families and instead are seeing this solely as a funding opportunity, which in turn narrows the funding pool for others.

Despite the concerns, some providers have reported an increased understanding of and success with accessing more diverse funding streams. Others have been able to increase their capacity and resources due to HAF (for example improving venues, expanding equipment and catering facilities), which stands them in good stead to be equipped to deliver HAF (or equivalent provision) in the future.

For us yes, if HAF continues the way it has done this past year then yes it is sustainable for us to continue the programme delivery as a business. It's an amazing initiative which provides amazing opportunities to individuals of which we are proud to be a part of. (Provider survey)

Going forward, providers feel that collaboration and partnerships are key to sustainability – building on the sense of community and family that is being seeded through the HAF programme, for example as this provider shares:



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



The collaborative spirit of the HAF programme encourages different providers to share resources, best practices, and expertise. This collaborative approach ensures that resources are used efficiently and that children receive a well-rounded experience. (Provider survey)



Reflection points



1. How might school engagement in the HAF be further increased, as a means of directly reaching and supporting families who haven't accessed HAF?
2. How can the Sandwell HAF team and providers deepen and broaden knowledge around intersectional diversity, and the inclusive practice needed for individual children at the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender and disability – for example a black child with an autism diagnosis or a non-binary young person from a refugee background?
3. How can the Sandwell HAF team and partners strengthen their offer for SEND CYP and families?
4. What scope is there for children and young people become more involved in the planning and implementation of the activities – for example as co-creators, co-producers and co-evaluators?
5. How might the food offer be improved, including increasing the variety of food cultures?
6. What barriers need to be reduced or removed to ensure equitable access to all Sandwell families?
7. How can the challenge of non-attendance continue to be addressed?
8. What do providers need (support, information, advice) to more effectively utilise referral pathways to other services for families?
9. What opportunities are there for Sandwell HAF providers to collaborate over delivery, signpost to one another's' work, and draw on each others' expertise as a way of strengthening the legacy and sustainability of the programme?
10. How can the evaluation in Year 3 capture the voices of a wider range of families, who may not have access to digital surveys or who have had less positive experiences of the HAF – to increase all of our learning?



Acknowledgments

While we are deliberately keeping families names anonymous, we would like extend a huge thanks to all of the parents, carers, children and young people who shared their experiences and time with us.



Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council



The 2023-2024 evaluation would not have been possible without the cooperation and time of the Sandwell HAF provider leaders and teams, notably: Russell Allen (Coneygre Arts Centre/Sandwell Youth Service); Charlene Cotton (Tibby Residents Association); Kam Kanth (Epic CiC); Megan Winup, Emma Male and Neil Male (Warrens Hall Riding School); Abdul Ajid and Sadia Hussain (Bangladeshi Women's Association); Vicky Parkinson (Time Step Dance); Emelye Westwood, Jamie Upton Speed and Marion Burns (Ideal for All); Chanel Mcleod and Daniel Smith (Limitless Youth Academy CiC) and all our amazing HAF providers.

Finally, the Sandwell HAF team – Sam Harman, Tracey Jobber, Sulma Begum, Natasha Chavda, Karen Greenfield, Donna Roberts Karen Williams, Mollie Jennings Parkes, Angela Sharma, Michelle Kelly and Zatoon Anayat for committing to this type of evaluation in the first place, for unwavering support and cooperation throughout the process, and for caring so much about this programme.

