



# Sandwell Holiday Activities and Food Programme

Impact report: 2022 – 2025

**Abigail D'Amore Associates**



# Welcome to our report

For many families like ours, school holidays are tough. The pressure of keeping our kids entertained, making sure they're safe, the cost of living crisis, and for some of us juggling work and home life can feel overwhelming.

That's why the Sandwell Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) is more than just a holiday club – it's a lifeline.

It provides activities our children look forward to, and a safe place where they can learn, grow, stay active, eat healthy food and make friends. It's where they build confidence, develop social skills, and feel part of something bigger – a real community.

For us parents, it's peace of mind. HAF means less stressful holidays, where we don't have to choose between work and making sure our kids are cared for. It gives us new memories, from cooking together to taking part in activities we can try at home – things we might not have thought of otherwise.

But three years isn't enough. HAF isn't just a short-term fix; it's essential. It's helped us feel supported, connected, and inspired – it's like finding a second family. Families across Sandwell need HAF to continue because when holidays are hard, HAF is the solution.

*Sandwell parents involved in the evaluation*



This young person's secondary school has an on-site gym that delivered HAF programmes during the holidays for students from the school and neighbouring school communities. The school is committed to providing pastoral care for students within and beyond term time. This young person decided to try weightlifting as part of the HAF programme.

*HAF Provider. [Sam's Gym, Oldbury Academy](#).*

***"Like, we don't want to [just] be like seen as something that the society wants to see us. Really just like, I just wanted to inspire others."***

# Introduction

The cost of living crisis in the UK hits low-income families the hardest, especially during school holidays when many can't afford activities, adding to financial strain and stress. For children and young people (CYP) missing out on these experiences can lead to isolation and exclusion. The Sandwell Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme tackles this by providing engaging, healthy holiday activities easing both financial and emotional pressures on families.

Launched as a pilot in 2018 by the Department for Education, HAF was established to 'provide healthy meals, enriching activities and free places to children from low-income families, benefiting their health, wellbeing and learning.'<sup>1</sup>

Sandwell is a metropolitan borough in the Black Country, West Midlands, comprising the six towns of Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich. The 12th most deprived borough in England, 35% of its children are living in what is considered relative poverty. Of the 63,462 (33,743 male, 29,719 female) children aged 4 to 16 in the area, over 21,989 meet the eligibility criteria to access HAF provision.<sup>2</sup>

The Sandwell HAF programme is delivered through a network of over 80 community organisations, schools and voluntary groups, often working with some of Sandwell's most vulnerable families. For many of these families, holiday periods can be particularly challenging due to poverty, domestic abuse and poor mental and physical health.

Furthermore, the Sandwell HAF team and providers are particularly aware of the growing mental health crisis among young people, which worsened after COVID-19. Projected numbers of children in Sandwell aged 7 to 16 with probable diagnosable mental health conditions increased from 5,247 in 2017 to 8,366 in 2022, highlighting the need for additional support during lengthy holiday periods.<sup>3</sup>

During the period April 2022–January 2025, the Sandwell HAF programme delivered 115,510 sessions across nine holiday periods (Easter, Summer, and Winter).

This evaluation report highlights the real impact of the Sandwell HAF programme on children, families, and providers. Through a participant-centred approach, it captures powerful stories and lived experiences that demonstrate the programme's value and areas for growth. We hope the findings will help shape future programme development, ensuring HAF continues to evolve, stay inclusive, and deliver life-enhancing experiences to Sandwell families.

**Abigail D'Amore**  
Lead Evaluator

1) Source: [Department for Education website](#), accessed March 2025.

2) Source: ONS 2021 census / HMRC

3) [Source Sandwell Better Mental Health Strategy 2023 – 2026](#).



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

HAF provider: [Tibby Residents Association](#)

***“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.”***

# Impact at a glance



**115,510**  
activity sessions  
delivered



**66,816**  
attendances\*



**80**  
providers

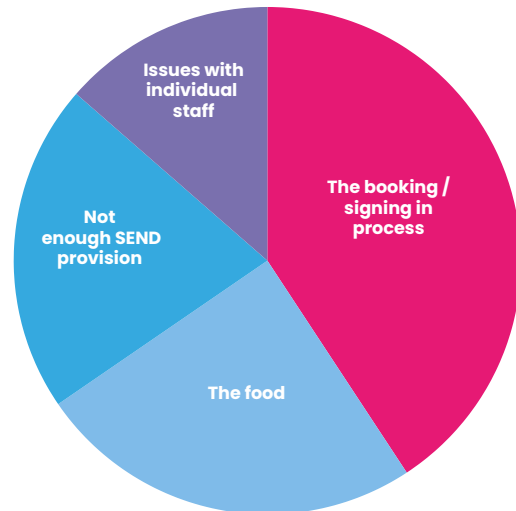
**98.9%**  
parents/carers **agreed**  
that having these  
**activities** available  
**helped them as a family**



**97.5%**  
of parents/carers  
agreed that there  
was an **excellent**  
**variety of activities**  
available



## The **top 5** areas for improvement



**98.6%** of parents/carers **agreed** that  
their **child learnt something new.**

**98.6%**  
of parents/carers agreed that  
their **child socialised with others**



# 77.3%

of parents/carers **agreed** that the **quality** of the food that their child received **was good**.



# 99.5%

of parents/carers agreed that their **child enjoyed the activities**.

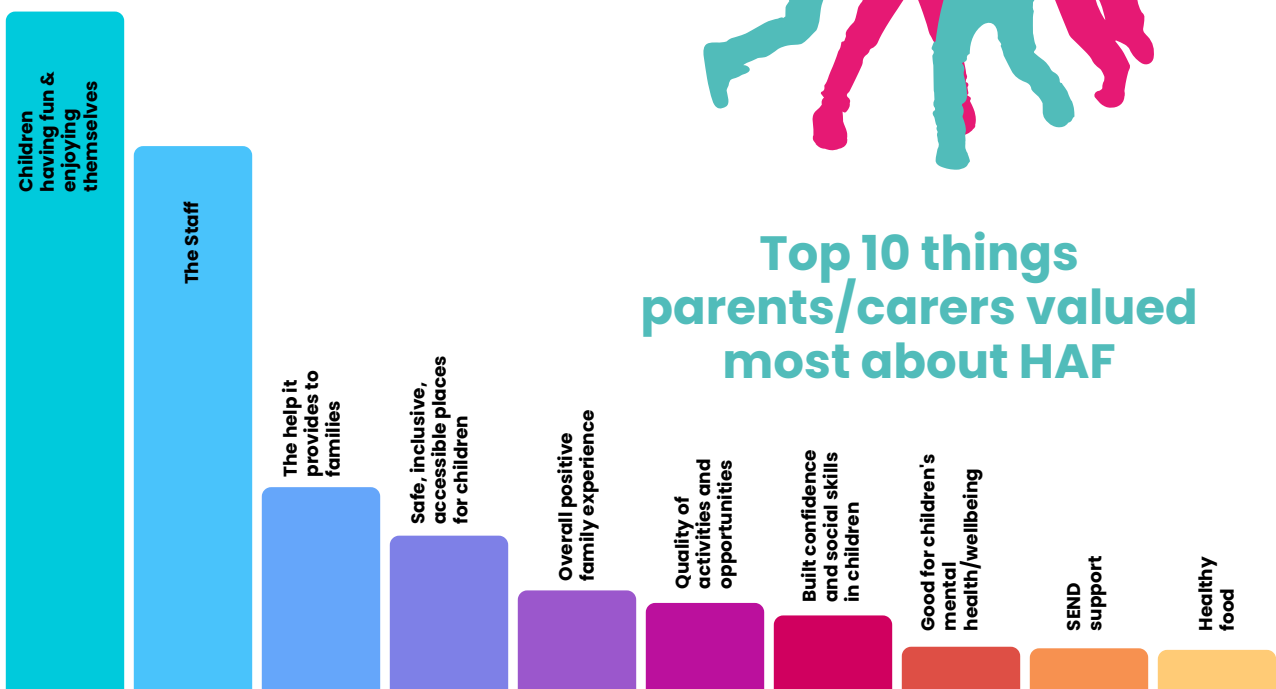


# 98.4%

of parents/carers would **recommend the HAF programme** to other families

# 99%

of parents/carers **agreed** that their child **felt included**





Accessing activities together is important for this family – and the HAF has provided opportunities to create family memories that are affordable. Mum explained that the children have all grown in confidence, experienced new foods that they've since tried at home and made new friends. The welcoming staff were important, remembering the children's names and putting them at ease.

HAF provider: [Forge Mill Farm](#)

***"I definitely think it's important for families like myself, who can't afford day trips out all the time. And we're doing things, nice things as a family, so it's creating a better family relationship, because we do fight if we're indoors all day, and it gets us out. I prefer being able to go together rather than drop them off."***





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. 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, which the HAF helped with.

*HAF provider: [Coneygre Arts Centre](#) / [Sandwell Youth Services](#)*

***“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.”***

# A breadth of activity and opportunity

Most HAF sessions followed the national HAF 4:4:4 model – four hours a day, four days a week, for four weeks (during the summer). However, the Sandwell programme allowed for flexibility, adapting to the needs of CYP and the resources of local providers. This resulted in a diverse and inclusive offer tailored to different age groups, abilities, and interests.

CYP had access to a wide range of activities, including but not limited to: **creative arts** (arts and crafts, songwriting, rock schools, singing, learning instruments, dancing, museums, circus skills, drama/theatre, role play, tie-dying); **sports** (football, basketball, volleyball, weightlifting, swimming, tennis, boxing, dodgeball, multi-sports); **food production** (planting and picking fruits and vegetables, food tastings, smoothie making, sushi making, pizza making); **trips** (safari park, seaside, theme parks, water parks, zoo, Severn Valley Railway); **outdoor adventures** (map reading, pony trekking, camp fires, forest school, canoeing, mini golf); **indoor adventures** (trampoline park, go karting, laser tag, inflatables); **animal care** (horse riding and grooming, farm animal care, animal shows); **entertainment** (cinema, magic show, theatre); **structured play** (chess club, board games, lego, 'party' games, messy play, gaming consoles); **outdoor play** (parks, playgrounds, den building, water fights); **sensory** (soft play, parachutes, sound buttons, bubbles, ball pits, quiet zones); **wellbeing** (yoga, mindfulness); **workshops and talks from experts** (magic school, talks from police); **seasonal activities** (egg hunts, pantomimes, festivals).

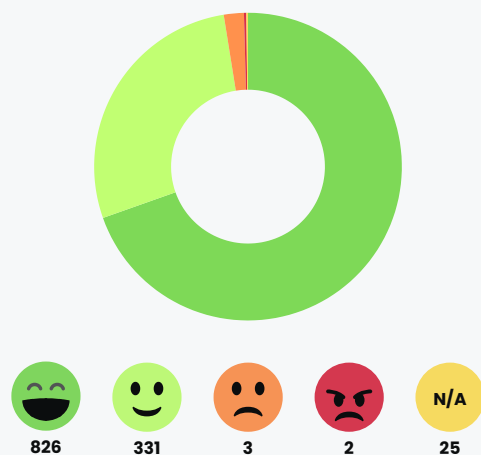
Many activities were designed to promote wellbeing, confidence and social skills, often incorporating play-based learning, teamwork and in some cases mindfulness. They typically combined free play, structured activities and shared mealtimes.

Providers aimed to make activities age-appropriate, relevant, meaningful and engaging, often consulting with CYP to co-design sessions. Some specialist SEND providers offered activities for CYP with additional and complex needs, while most providers operated an open-door policy, fostering an inclusive environment. Providers often celebrated aspects of cultural diversity through activities for example through running workshops such as henna art.

*Of 1187 parent/carer survey responses 69.6% strongly agreed and 27.9% agreed that there was an excellent variety of activities available.*

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

There was an excellent variety of activities for my child





The HAF provided a range of opportunities for this family to keep busy, active and inspired during the holidays, including cheerleading, dancing, farm visits and chess. Participating in the HAF led to the children continuing with hobbies beyond the holidays with Mum sharing it helped them become brave to try new things.

HAF provider: [Chess Mate](#)

***“Before the club, I didn't do chess at all because it was too confusing, yeah, but after the club, because they taught it really well, and I had to do it.”***

## Healthy eating at the heart of HAF

Providing nutritious meals and food education is a core part of the HAF programme. According to [DfE 2023 guidance](#), all providers must offer at least one meal per day (breakfast, lunch or an evening meal) that meets School Food Standards.

Meals were often more than just food. They became shared experiences, where CYP ate together with peers and adults, learning social skills, patience, and the value of taking time over meals. In some sessions, food preparation was incorporated into the activities, teaching CYP essential cooking skills.

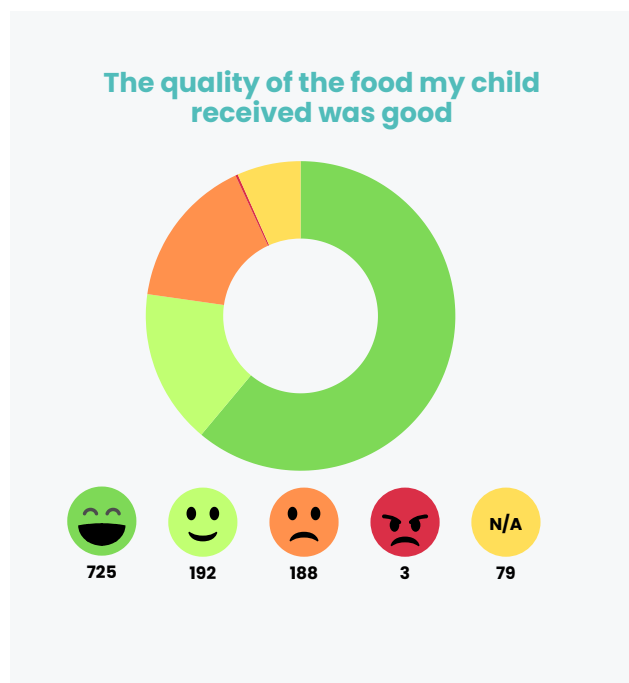
Providers considered dietary needs, including allergies, cultural preferences (such as halal and vegan options), and specific requirements for SEND children. Many providers became increasingly aware of diverse food cultures, adjusting meal preparation and storage accordingly.

Some aligned meals with religious festivals like Ramadan, ensuring that older CYP who were fasting felt supported.

Providers often focused on introducing CYP to a variety of fruits, vegetables, and healthy food ensuring balanced meals and encouraging healthier eating habits.

*Of 1187 parent/carer survey responses 61.1% strongly agreed and 16.2% agreed that the quality of the food their child received was good.*

***“Food was halal and a big thumbs up. Would 100% use again. Would highly recommend to the whole Community.” (Parent/carer)***



## Commitment to physical activity and play

Keeping children active and engaged during the holidays was a key priority of the Sandwell HAF by incorporating structured sports and exercise, outdoor and indoor play to encourage movement.

Activities ranged from sports camps, park play, and outdoor games to other forms of physical activity such as gardening and mucking out horses.



The HAF provision has helped low income working families, whose children have been able to attend. These two single-parent families claimed the HAF is a 'lifeline' for them to be able to work, as well as give the children opportunities that increase confidence, support with making friends, and learning new things. They particularly valued the inclusive approach this provider takes, and the reassurance this provides them.

HAF provider: [Creative Active Lives](#)

***"I've noticed the staff know each child's name when we drop them off. And they're just so full of energy, they're really happy. Always, like, engaging with the children. I think they're really good."***

# Impact

## Happiness

One of the most consistent reports from CYP and their families was the enjoyment felt as a result of attending HAF, with multiple reports of smiling, laughing and happiness. Parents/carers often noticed their CYP's excitement, with no trouble getting them out of bed, which was often a reported contrast to their motivation for school. Many CYP didn't want to leave at the end of the day and repeatedly asked to return.

*"Really happy with this holiday activity. There is a good range and my daughter comes home ever so happy every day." (Parent/carer)*

Even those who were initially hesitant often grew in confidence, gradually joining in and participating by the end of the sessions. Providers embraced different levels of engagement, allowing CYP to interact at their own pace. Parents/carers were frequently surprised by how well their children engaged and behaved.

*"One child was known for struggling in large group settings and behaviour. During the summer they developed a brilliant working relationship with the coach and engaged and helped with equipment etc. When parent picked up the child, the coach reported the positive day had by the child. Parent said 'are you sure that's my child?!'. Parent was extremely happy that the child had engaged and the child and parent left happy." (Provider)*

## Structure and routine

HAF activities brought structure and purpose to the holidays, especially during the long summer break. For many CYP, particularly those with SEND, the regular routine provided a sense of stability, reducing stress and uncertainty.

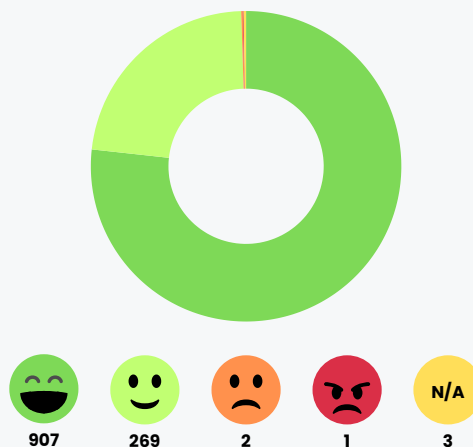
By keeping CYP active and engaged, the HAF often prevented boredom. With something to look forward to each day, CYP stayed motivated, entertained, and socially connected.

CYP often shared experiences with their families by talking about what they had learned, the friends they made, and even demonstrated new skills/hobbies at home such as planting or dancing. Some providers ensured CYP had something tangible to take home each week for example crafts or food they had prepared, encouraging them to celebrate their achievements with family and some even shared their experiences with teachers.

*"For your child to say he enjoyed and wants to go back that says it all." (Parent/carer)*

Of 1182 parent/carer survey responses 76.7% strongly agreed and 22.8% agreed that their child enjoyed the activities.

### My child enjoyed the activities



*"[The holidays are] problematic with kids with special needs, with autism disorder... When they stop this routine going every day to school, then they go into the routine [of] not going to school every day, and have a long break, then coming back to the routine. It's very difficult. So this, you know, going to the camp one day, or maybe two days, or maybe every day, this is keeping them engaged and [in] their routine." (Parent/carer)*



This family attended a movement and storytelling HAF activity in an outdoor woodland setting for children with additional needs. They enjoyed the inclusive nature of the activities, being outdoors, and particularly the fire!

HAF provider: [Fantastic Journeys CiC](#)

***“We went knowing we were going into a safe welcoming environment where our son can be himself, which was just massively important.”***

## Development of skills and knowledge

Of 1187 parent/carer survey responses 64% strongly agreed and 31.8% agreed that their child learnt something new. This included practical skills like cooking, sports, arts and crafts, music, and dance, alongside important life skills such as teamwork, resilience, patience, and respect. Some families and providers observed CYP improving cognitive and fine motor skills through play and creative activities.

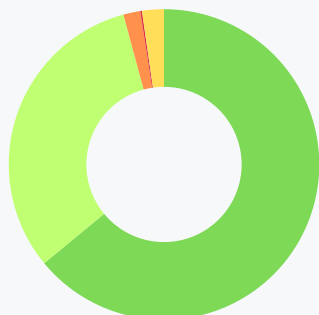
*"HAF provides a great opportunity for children to learn life skills which will benefit them as they grow older."* (Provider)

Beyond skill-building, some CYP expanded their general knowledge, learning about for example animal care, nature, healthy eating, sports rules, and food production to name but a few. Others developed a greater appreciation for different cultures and communities. Some parents/carers noticed positive changes at home, with CYP adopting new habits like tidying up and being more organised after attending HAF sessions.

*"I learnt how to look after a horse properly and I learnt how to get on a horse. You use a stool and you put your foot in the rein and hop over and that's what I learnt."* (Young person)

For some CYP, the programme introduced them to self-regulation techniques they could continue using beyond the activity.

### My child learnt something new



## Creating childhood memories

The Sandwell HAF programme has given many CYP access to exciting, high-quality experiences they might not have had otherwise. This has had the impact of broadening horizons and creating lasting childhood memories.

*"We want to give every child the best day of their lives every single day. That's our mission. And what's really lovely is that the whole team are the same. It's not like a job, it's that we've got a chance to have every kid leave going, 'that was the best day ever, and I can't wait to do it again!'"* (Provider)

Providers shared the joy and wonder of CYP experiencing something for the first time – feeling sand between their toes, discovering seashells, riding a bike, or the thrill of a rollercoaster for example. These moments were not just fun; they were transformative, often inspiring new hobbies and interests while providing CYP something special to share when they went back to school.

*"They had their own stories and their own experience to take back to school."* (Parent/carer)

The HAF also provided places for CYP to explore, play, and socialise. Parents valued the opportunity for their children to 'just be children', making friends, and engaging in stimulating activities that ignited their imaginations.

Young people often recognised the benefit of engaging in real-world adventures, and learning how to play in a way that fostered creativity, connection and joy.

*"We're in utter awe, like. We don't [get to] experience things like this."* (Young person)





This family attended the HAF provision at their local community centre. The three girls attended all of the holiday clubs, and enjoyed all of the activities including arts and crafts. It helped Mum by giving her time to go shopping and sort things out at home during the holidays, and she now has become a volunteer at the centre.

HAF provider: [Friar Park Millenium Centre](#)

***“They like coming here. They cry if I don’t bring them. It helps them communicate with other children. And they sleep better.”***

## Friendships and social skills

A large majority of parents/carers agreed that HAF helped their children to socialise, make new friends, and develop healthy relationships.

CYP spoke about the enjoyment of connecting with others, forming bonds with new and existing friends. Engaging in shared experiences together – from outdoor adventures to creative activities – strengthened friendships, which sometimes lasted beyond the holidays.

*“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.” (Young person)*

HAF fostered meaningful and genuine connections to cement a sense of community cohesion among CYP, due to bringing CYP into friendship dynamics from a multitude of backgrounds that differed in a range of ways including their socio-economic status, racialised identities, ethnicities, their abilities, varying family dynamics and across genders and faiths. SEND children benefited from inclusive environments and mixing with others, while some CYP found like-minded peers, such as young carers, with whom they could relate to due to shared experiences.

*“She became more confident. Mixed with other children from different schools and different ages, sort of changed her confidence.” (Parent/carer)*

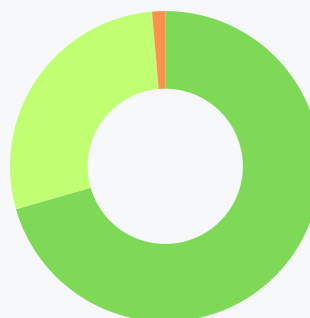
Beyond making friends, the HAF helped some CYP develop social skills including collaboration, listening, turn-taking, sharing, independent skills and empathy. Many also gained confidence in expressing themselves, verbally or non-verbally. This was felt to be particularly important due to providers and parents/carers noticing a decline in social skills following the COVID pandemic. For some CYP, HAF played a role in supporting the transition from primary to secondary school, helping them adjust to new environments and behaviours.

A key theme in HAF has been cultivating leadership among older young people (aged 13+), who took on mentoring roles, supported younger children, and served as positive role models. This leadership development sometimes led to formal volunteering, coaching opportunities, and even qualifications—for example, one group earned food hygiene certificates while assisting with meal preparation during a summer programme. These sorts of opportunities fostered responsibility, achievement, and personal growth, for example:

*“I went from being a learner to now I’m teaching School of Rock, so I learnt from the first one and I took the experience away from that, proved myself, so now I’m teaching people at School of Rock.” (Young Person)*

Of 1178 parent/carer survey responses 70.5% strongly agreed and 28.1% agreed that their child socialised with others.

### My child socialised with others



831



331



16

*“Before the Easter delivery, they were really apprehensive, like engaging them, communicating with each other, but now I see a significant change in all of them engaging well with each other” (Delivery staff)*



This group of young people regularly attended HAF provision with a particular focus on sports and physical activities at their local community centre. 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, through supporting and raising awareness of other services that are available to them.

HAF provider: [Bangladeshi Women's Association](#)

***“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.”***

## Increasing aspiration

Some families and providers observed that aspiration levels among CYP attending HAF activities were low:

*“At our club we have quite a few Looked After Children. As part of our offer we do life skills sessions where children get to talk and create art works based on the theme. One of the themes were about their ambitions. And there was a child in particular who didn't have any dreams and aspirations. This was an opportunity for them to really think about what they could become.”* (Provider)

However, HAF has played an important role in inspiring ambition and broadening horizons with many CYP becoming motivated to pursue new interests beyond the programme. Examples included joining sports or performing arts clubs, earning Scout badges, and performing music at local venues. Providers also reported a rise in attendance at other activities they offered, with many young people pursuing further interests and opportunities, particularly in sport. This also extended to informal engagement for example:

*“She was saying that her and some friends have been practicing cheerleading skills, and then she'd come home and she'd been watching videos on cheerleading, and then she'd sort of taken an interest in that. And she was talking to me about all sorts. It was obviously a whole world that she'd never really tapped into before, that she's then taken home and sort of looked into which she likes, doing that kind of thing.”* (Parent/carer)

One of the biggest influences has been the HAF provider delivery staff – community leaders, coaches, volunteers, external experts in sport/arts, youth workers and so on. Whether through direct encouragement or simply observing role models, CYP were exposed to qualities like courage, determination, resilience and leadership. Participating in new or different experiences – from watching actors in a theatre production to being coached in how to canoe – often helped CYP see new possibilities for their future, not only in careers, but also in how to conduct themselves.

*“They show a lot of courage, obviously determination, to teach us right. Make sure we're on the right path. I really think, like, the leadership skills, it teaches us a lot about being an adult.”* (Young person)

By bringing in leaders and experts from the wider community for example the police, HAF also helped break down barriers, fostering greater connections and trust among young people.

*“So we found a lot of the children were hiding under tables, not wanting to come in – because of what they've experienced at home. They disclosed about police turning up to the house and taking a parent or moving children. There's a lot of barriers. And the police have shown, they've joined in all the activities, played football with them, doing the cooking... and they ask now, are the police coming? They want them to come back.”* (Provider)





This family accessed a HAF programme delivered by a SEND provider who had expertise in supporting children with profound and complex disabilities. Their daughter loves socialising, and struggles not being in school and out of routine during the holidays. Having something sociable she could come to during the holidays, where Mum has peace of mind she is safe and enjoying herself, means less stress for the family.

*HAF Provider: [4Community Trust @ 4CT The Hub](#)*

***“She always comes home smiling and happy. Her face says it all.”***

# Food enjoyment and habits

The HAF programme made healthy eating enjoyable. CYP shared many examples of their favourite meals at HAF, including but not limited to macaroni cheese, pizza, stir fry, chicken curry, spaghetti Bolognese, fruit smoothies, and vegetable chilli.

***"They were quite happy. You know, this was healthy food and I was also quite satisfied."***  
(Parent/carer)

Many CYP tried new foods they hadn't eaten before, sometimes surprising parents who relayed they were previously fussy eaters. The variety of food and the shared mealtime experience with peers were often reasons for their openness to trying new things.

***"They won't eat at home but will try anything here. I would do anything to see his diet stretch more. If you can do more of what you have done today it will be life changing. Already amazed. Watching him eat roasted veg frittata and homemade tomato sauce/pasta has blown my mind. Some days he won't even eat his safe foods like white bread."*** (Parent/carer)

Families reported that their food experiences at the HAF sometimes increased interest in healthy eating at home. Some parents changed the way they shopped and prepared meals as a result.

HAF providers often introduced CYP to foods from different cultures and cuisines from Sandwell communities - from samosas from the high street to spicy noodles. This not only increased awareness and appreciation of a wider range of foods but also gave CYP an opportunity to build upon shared experiences. Some learned basic nutrition principles such as food groups, vitamins, and the benefits of a balanced diet.

***"[We learnt] you've got to stay healthy and have no heart diseases."*** (Young person)

Many holiday activities included cooking from scratch, sometimes involving CYP picking fresh ingredients like fruits, vegetables, and herbs. This hands-on experience not only made food preparation fun but also gave CYP skills and techniques that some carried into their home routines. Being involved in meal preparation during the HAF activities often led to an increased likeliness of CYP consuming unfamiliar foods.

***"It's good because [child] 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. He was obsessed with the flatbread and hummus, we made that again. They are cheap recipes so we can make them at home."*** (Parent/carer)



In this family 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.

HAF Provider: [Limitless Academy CiC](#)

***"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."***

# Encouraging active lifestyles

The HAF programme provided daily opportunities to keep CYP physically active and moving. CYP and families recognised the important impact of being active during the holidays, notably increased physical fitness, improved stamina, and enhanced mental wellbeing.

***"I guess you're not sitting in one place for most of the time. They get you to move around a lot."*** (Young person)

Being outdoors, including during winter, had a positive impact on mental wellbeing. Fresh air, nature, and active play helped CYP burn off energy, reduce stress, and improve their mood.

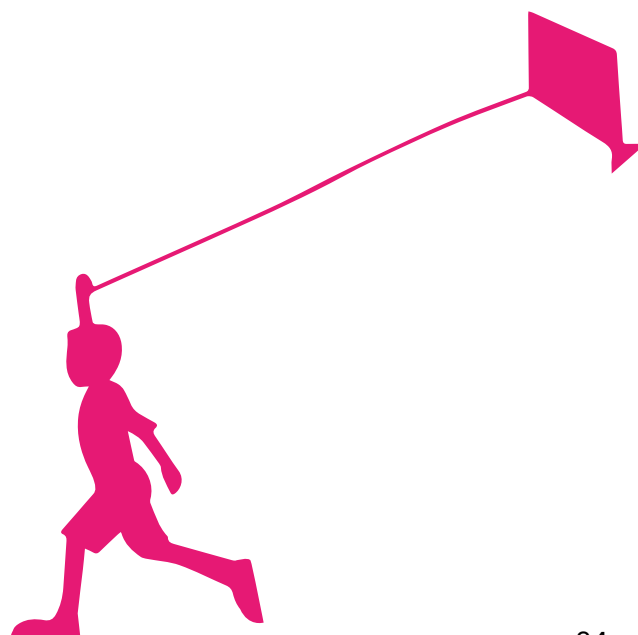
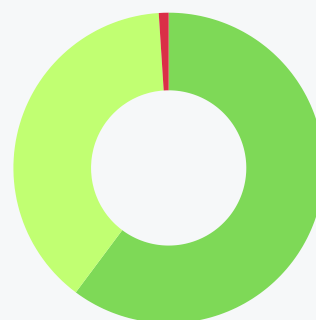
Many CYP became more aware of how exercise influenced their emotional wellbeing, recognising its benefits beyond just fitness.

***"I felt better cause we was outside."***  
(Young person)

For many, HAF sparked a longer-term interest in physical activity. Some CYP asked to continue sports at home, while others discovered new activities through sports centres that they wanted to pursue beyond the programme.

99% of provider survey responses indicated that CYP's physical health improved as a result of HAF.

**The physical health of children and young people has improved as a result of the HAF programme**







This family has been involved in running the HAF since it started, with the daughter initially attending and now being a regular volunteer. For them it has been part of an extended family, and has been a way of them building a relationship with wider members of the community. HAF is a highlight for them as a family.

HAF provider: [Friar Park Millenium Centre](#)

***“It’s our favourite time of year. Once it goes live, we get so excited. We just love it, we absolutely love it. We’re a good team as well, a really good team.”***

# Inclusion and belonging

HAF providers worked hard to make CYP and their families feel welcome, with some allowing parents/carers to stay at the activities. The majority of activities were held in safe, accessible spaces often including quiet zones, outdoor areas, and adaptations for SEND CYP, ensuring all could participate.

Many providers and delivery staff were already familiar faces in the community, fostering trust and a sense of belonging. Staff often came from the same local backgrounds as the CYP, acting as positive role models with shared experiences such as culture, faith, gender and disability. As a result families often felt represented, understood, and supported, with some parents even volunteering alongside providers, creating a multi-generational community spirit.

*“Because we had black families come, and then when they saw us, they were like, ‘black people’s running this y’know.’” (Provider)*

The Southport tragedy of July 2024 reinforced the importance of secure venues for children, bringing reassurance to families that this was provided. In a borough that has a fractious history of race relations<sup>4</sup> inclusion and belonging in the context of HAF also means race, ethnicity and culture being key tenets of CYP feeling psychologically safe and secure.

Hosting HAF in community centres and schools meant many families discovered local resources they hadn’t been aware of previously in their local area, strengthening community connections.

*“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/carers)*

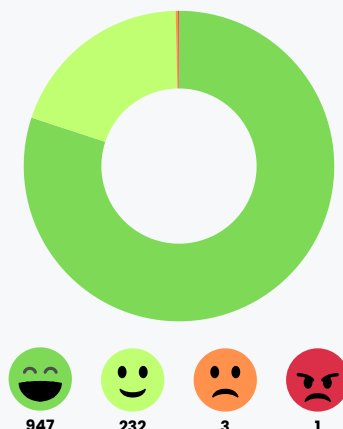
Families consistently praised staff for their genuine care, patience, and dedication to making CYP feel included. Many shared examples of staff ‘going the extra mile’, from individual phone calls to reassure parents before activities to offering personal, emotional and physical support to CYP during sessions. Staff helped CYP feel at ease from the moment they arrived, providing a warm welcome often by remembering their names, and ensuring smooth handovers during pick-up and drop-off to minimise anxiety.

*“It starts like, from the second they walk into the door. We remember every child’s name. I remember all of them, even if they only came once last year. I can still like, welcome them, like we’re really glad you’re here. And the thing is, it’s not a lie, we are always really glad to see them.” (Provider)*

CYP often saw HAF staff as a combination of teacher, family member, and friend: approachable yet firm, fun yet supportive. Qualities of effective staff members were described for example as energetic, kind, passionate, encouraging, child-led, democratic, fair, approachable and funny, often actively participating in activities with CYP rather than simply overseeing them.

Of 1183 parent/carers survey responses 80.1% strongly agreed and 19.6% agreed that the staff were approachable and friendly.

## The staff were approachable and friendly



<sup>4</sup> See for example <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq8yy312xkxo> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/britains-most-racist-election-smethwick-50-years-on>



For some young people the HAF programme gave them a safe place to go that took them away from the streets. This group of young people attended holiday provision which provided a regular safe space with activities, but also took them on trips outside of the local area.

HAF provider: [Yemeni Community Association](#)

***“Some people when they’re not at this, they’ll be out causing trouble somewhere else. That’s why being here makes it better.”***

# A Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

## inclusive approach

Within their expertise and resource providers worked hard to ensure SEND children could participate, making reasonable adaptations to physical environments. Specialist SEND providers offered tailored provision, including for CYP with profound and complex needs, while general providers trained staff to accommodate individual CYP needs including behaviours as a result of social, emotional or mental health needs and autism for example. From creating quiet spaces to

providing sensory aids like ear defenders, the intention was to ensure every CYP was able to participate in their own way.

Many staff had backgrounds in teaching, SEND education, or additional training in de-escalation techniques. Parents/carers shared how well providers supported CYP with anxiety, autism, allergies, and sensory sensitivities for example:

***“The provider made accommodations to support not only my high needs son, but also my autistic daughter. They encouraged them both to be themselves, but also allowed them to do things at their own pace, providing quieter/less busy spaces or letting them get their ear defenders if case of noises. My son does not often trust people to support him and his needs as they can be complex, but he has put his trust into [the staff], which is something amazing!”*** (Parent/carer)

## Impact on children and young people

Generally CYP felt comfortable and secure being left at HAF venues, and/or going on trips, with parents/carers often expressing surprise by how willingly their children adapted.

CYP generally formed positive relationships with staff, often opening up about their thoughts and feelings in ways they might not at home. Many confided in staff leading to CYP feeling heard, valued, and supported. Unlike school, where structure can be rigid, HAF gave them a greater sense of agency.

***“This was the first time that [he’s] ever been left anywhere. So it was quite a big thing, and it went so well for him. The staff were really, really caring, and I felt really comfortable leaving him, and he was absolutely fine.”***  
(Parent/carer)

For some, HAF was more than just a physically safe space - it also offered psychological safety. Young people felt protected from negative influences like crime, drugs, and gangs, while others found respite from challenging home environments, including caring responsibilities or family struggles.

***“I can trust them more and they’re not just teaching us like 24/7, sitting us in a chair and just telling us stuff, they get us included, and they’re always like, reassuring us. So she was like, you know you can tell me anything, how are you?”*** (Young person)

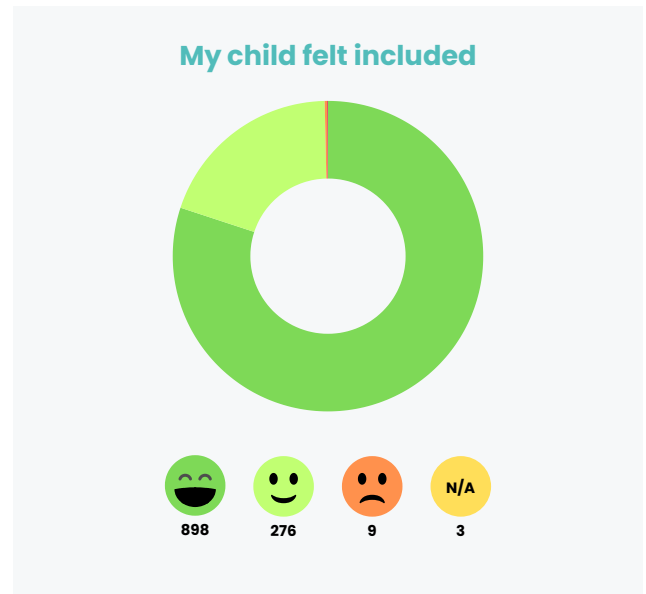
***“This stops us from going into places that we’re not supposed to be at, for example, you could be chilling around the town centre getting involved with the wrong people, it could affect you mentally and physically. And when you compare this to school, it’s more freedom. You talk, you socialise more. But there’s an element of respect between everyone. So no one gets really disrespected, or hurt.”*** (Young person)

Many CYP and their families indicated how they felt seen, heard and accepted for who they were. One parent shared how their daughter didn't feel the need to hide her autism at HAF for example. SEND CYP gained confidence, engaging in activities with support when needed. Some improved their self-regulation skills, benefiting from sensory-friendly experiences and environments tailored to their needs.

**“There was no precious circle. No exclusion. No one was marginalised.”** (Young person)

Due to providers often going above and beyond to accommodate CYP with additional needs, HAF helped CYP embrace diversity, build empathy, and feel truly at home in a space where everyone belonged.

Of 1186 parent/carer survey responses 75.7% strongly agreed and 23.3% agreed that their child felt included.



## Sandwell HAF Inclusive Practice conference

In November 2023 the Sandwell HAF team hosted a conference at West Bromwich Albion Football Club for 120 HAF provider delivery staff. Participants collaborated in structured discussions about inclusive practice with the aim of improving the collective quality of HAF delivery in Sandwell. A graphic illustrator captured the key themes from the day:



Department for Education

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council



For this family, the HAF provided a means for siblings to access activities together during the holidays. The eldest child (pictured) has complex additional needs. Traditionally Mum has needed to seek separate holiday clubs and provision for his younger sister, however the HAF programme provided a club that accepted all children.

HAF provider: [SAFS](#)

***“His behaviour is picked up off mainstream kids. It’s good for me as a parent to hear he’s been mixing with the mainstream kids and making new friends. He’s grown in confidence with his food choices and things like that as well.”***

## Wider personal, social and emotional impact

While the HAF programme cannot be causally linked to improved mental health of CYP, many indicators from evidence presented in this evaluation suggests it has significantly contributed to positive changes in CYP's overall wellbeing, confidence and social skills.

By providing a structured routine, social connections, healthy food, physical activity, and new experiences, the programme has helped shape young people holistically, reducing social isolation and fostering resilience, especially during often difficult holiday periods.

### Reducing social anxiety

Many CYP, especially only children or those with limited social interactions, reported feeling less isolated during school holidays. Having the opportunity to regularly socialise with peers boosted confidence, helping CYP become less shy, more aware of others, and more included in group settings.

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

Other CYP who had experienced bullying at school found friendships through HAF, making them feel more secure about returning to school.

### Boosting confidence and self-esteem

Many CYP gained confidence not just in activities like sports or performing arts, but in themselves as individuals. They often felt more comfortable expressing their true selves and coming out of their shells.

*"My lad has really come out of his shell since attending the summer one, he couldn't wait for this one."* (Parent/carer)

Anecdotes were shared of CYP having the courage to overcome personal barriers and try new things. This often led to increased resilience and a sense of pride in their accomplishments. One provider shared a powerful story of a 14-year-old child diagnosed with a brain tumour who joined HAF feeling shy and withdrawn. After attending a holiday camp, they built friendships, bonded with staff, and gained confidence. Their family expressed gratitude for the positive change, and they have continued participating ever since.





This family became part of the local community hub and accessed the HAF provision, as they found the holidays particularly challenging if they weren't able to visit family during these times. The children shared how they enjoyed experiencing lots of different activities and made new friends.

HAF provider: [Bearwood Community Hub](#)

***"I wanted to come every day – the grown ups, they were just like family!"***



# A lifeline for Sandwell families

The Sandwell HAF programme has become indispensable for many Sandwell families, providing much-needed financial, emotional, and practical support during school holidays, which can be stressful and expensive.

*"Yes, we support the children. But I think the biggest support that we offer at HAF is for those parents." (Provider)*

Many providers went above and beyond for families, for example by sharing leftover meals, preparing food hampers (particularly during Winter), sourcing digital equipment and offering financial advice and

signposting to families struggling in the cost of living crisis. Parents/carers often could talk to provider staff about for example housing issues, or mental health concerns, allowing providers to signpost them to help.

*"Because I think it's building up the trust getting to know us I think watching us and just spending five minutes chatting through the process of like nearly two years now that I know she will ask for help. She will say she's struggling. Just tell us her's got no food in her cupboards. She can tell us when the children play up and she doesn't know what to do."*

(Provider)

## Impact on families

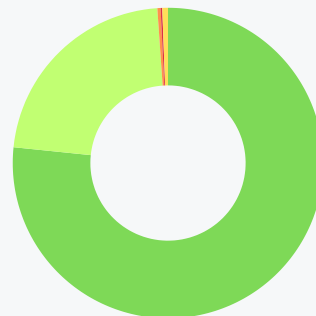
HAF has in many ways transformed the holiday experience for families in Sandwell - not just through providing meals and activities for children, but by reducing financial stress, increasing access to vital support, and building stronger, more resilient relationships with providers and communities. The majority of parents and carers have expressed deep gratitude, often feeling surprised by the range of activities and support available.

*"I am single on benefits, and it's a struggle in general with affording the uniform at this time of year. So I love the fact that they do HAF, because it means we can have free days out and they don't realise mum's not paying."*

(Parent/carers)

Of 1185 parent/carers survey responses 76.6% strongly agreed and 22.3% agreed that having these activities available helped them as a parent/carers.

### Having these activities available helped me as a parent/carers



908



264



4



2



N/A

7



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

HAF provider: *Tibby Residents Association*

***“We just do it because we want to do it. 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.”***

## Easing financial pressures

The HAF relieved the financial strain on families of providing extra meals, activities, and childcare during holidays. It provided CYP experiences families couldn't otherwise afford, for example trips, cultural experiences and sports. It particularly helped single parents, families of SEND children, families also looking after younger children, and those without transport to be able to access activities. Providing hot meals helped reduce family food bills, giving parents/carers peace of mind that their CYP had a healthy meal each day.

***"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."***  
***(Parent/carer)***

The HAF also supported low-income working families, which allowed parents/carers to continue working during school holidays without the burden of extra childcare costs or loss of income. This was particularly beneficial for those without local family support.

***"I wouldn't be able to survive without it. And it sounds silly, but it's as simple as that, I would not be able to work if it wasn't for this."***  
***(Parent/carer)***

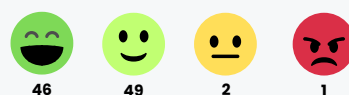
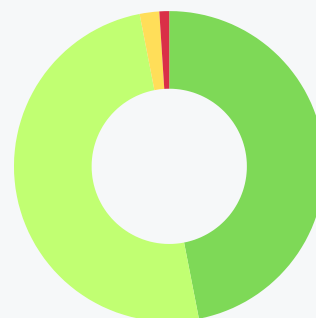
## Connecting families to vital services

For many families, bringing their children to HAF helped them build trust with provider services, making it easier for them to ask for help when needed. Some providers had Citizens Advice, housing officers, and cost-of-living support teams or information available at drop-off times, so parents/carers could easily access advice and guidance.

HAF providers were able to reach some families who hadn't previously engaged with support services, helping them access longer-term support. As a direct result of HAF, families were referred for example to: food banks; early help intervention; English language and maths lessons; food banks; cost of living/financial support; debt management; social services; drug, alcohol and tobacco addiction services; mental health and wellbeing; energy/water saving companies; domestic violence; family information services; support for parents of children with SEND; welfare rights; health services; CAMHS; benefits and housing.

*96.9% of providers agreed the HAF programme has increased families' awareness of other services and opportunities available to them:*

**The HAF programme has increased families' awareness of other services and opportunities available to them**





This group of young people accessed HAF provision at a centre within their community. 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.

HAF provider: [Bangladeshi Women's Association](#)

***“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.”***

## Contributing to improved mental health

School holidays can feel overwhelming, especially for families with multiple children or those with SEND. The HAF provided parents/carers with a break, allowing them to rest, run errands, or simply have some quiet time. For parents/carers of children with SEND, it provided respite while knowing their child was in a safe space being looked after by professionals.

***"I think it's really important that local councils carry on funding programmes like this because it's a lifeline for people like us with a child that is a bit different, and can get funny looks and going somewhere where he can be himself is really important."***  
(Parent/carer interview)

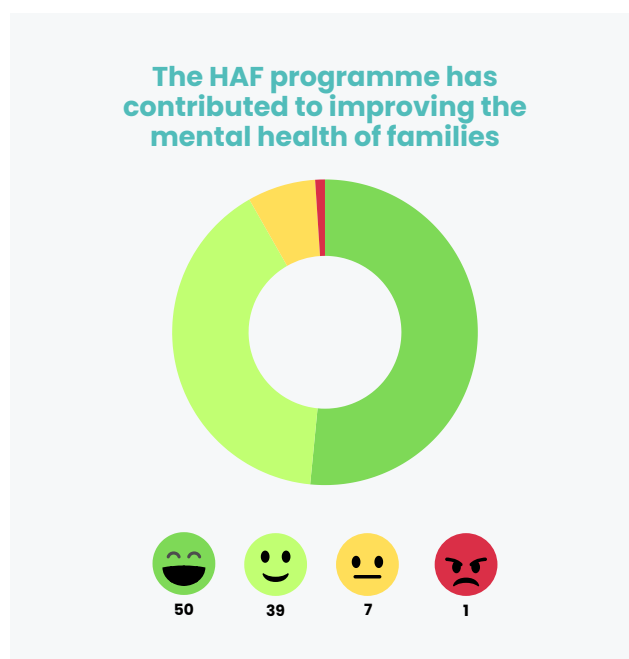
Some parents/carers recovering from illness or surgery, or with mental health issues, said HAF provided a much-needed rest during the holidays.

***"I've got anxiety myself and over the holidays, 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, but there's just sometimes I just want to be alone with myself, and they've got somewhere to go and it was nice."*** (Parent/carer)

For other parents/carers the time during the holidays was used for studying or attending language or additional skills classes.

***"I am here you know, for the English, Maths class and for the customer service class...I need extra help with my English and my Maths and they give you that extra time for that as well."*** (Parent/carer)

91.8% of providers agreed the HAF programme has contributed to improving the mental health of families.



Parents/carers generally expressed reassurance knowing that their CYP were safe, engaged in activities and receiving healthy food. Their CYP often came home tired, happy, and well-fed, reducing burdens on parents/carers during the evenings. Parents/carers valued the fact that HAF was not just about 'free babysitting/childcare' - it provided their CYP with valuable opportunities to socialise, learn, and experience new things that they might not otherwise have received.

## Reducing social isolation

Many parents formed new friendships, particularly those who don't have a traditional 'school gate' network. For some parents/carers this was an opportunity to leave the house during the holidays. Parents of SEND children found support and understanding among other families in similar situations. Through conversations with other families at drop off/pick up times parents/carers often learned about support services other families were accessing.

***"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)



This family accessed a SEND sports camp. It was the first time Mum had left her son at a holiday activity, and was impressed by how caring the staff were, meaning she felt comfortable with leaving him. His confidence really improved as a result, and he was able to regulate his emotions well.

*HAF provider: [West Bromwich Albion Foundation](#)*

***"He's done football, dodgeball, archery, croquet. They had quite nice handovers, when you drop off and when you pick up, if there's any problems, they would come out straight away and say, and praise him when he comes out, like they just said that you were golden and he was a superstar the whole time. Don't take HAF away. It's really, really needed, and it's made such a positive impact on the summer."***

## Creating family memories

HAF supported with removing the social pressure on some parents/carers to provide costly days out, yet still ensuring their CYP made holiday memories and had experiences to talk about at school and with their peers. It helped families receiving benefits-related free school meals feel less isolated, reducing the stigma around financial situations.

***“With social media it gives you the impression that you’ve got to be out, your kids have got to be seen having fun here there and everywhere - there’s a lot of pressure to get the kids out doing things and not just sitting on the computer which is completely understandable. So to have an activity that’s free to come to is really important.”***  
(Parent/carer)

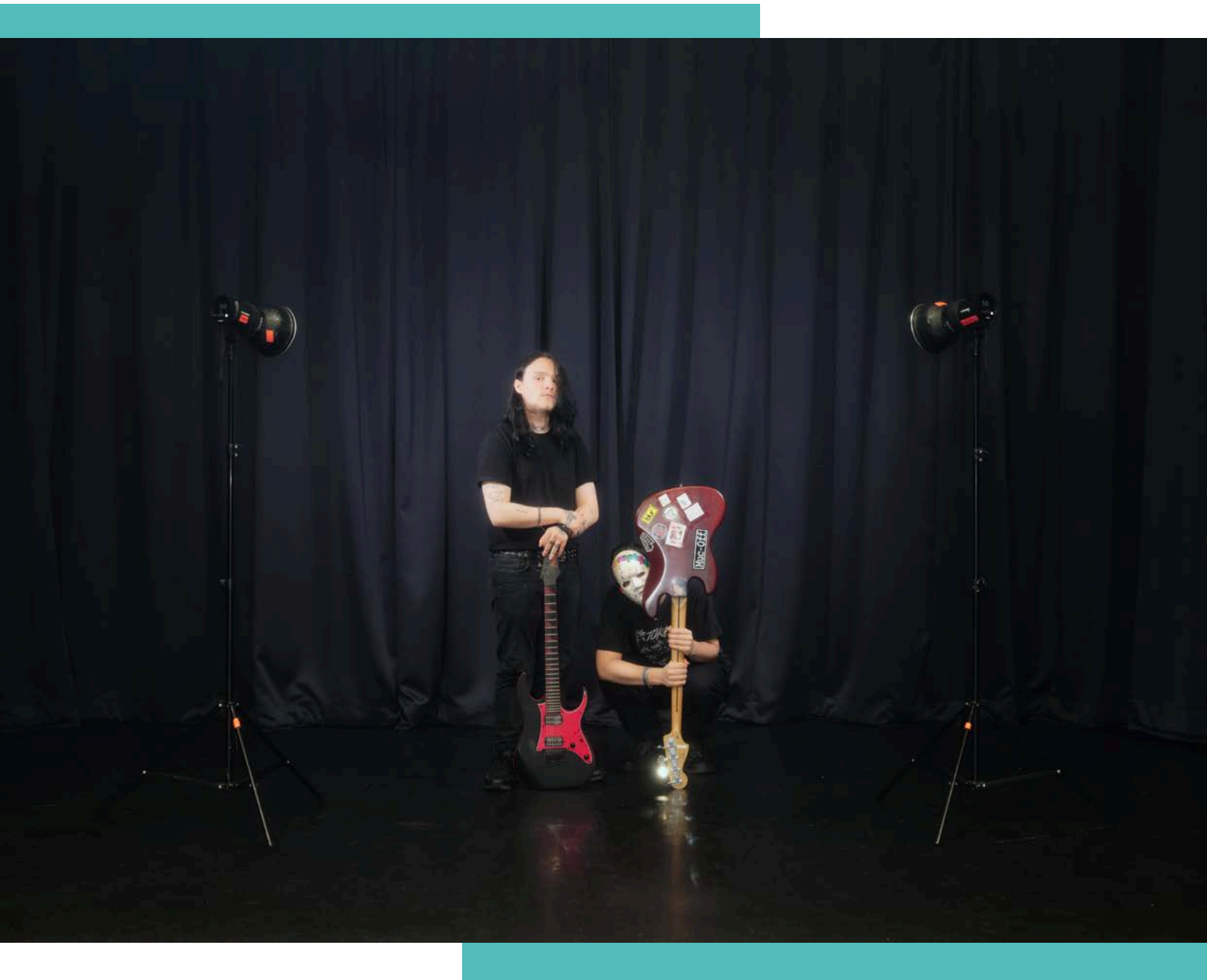
Through the HAF providers, many families also discovered other free activities they could access beyond the HAF, helping them plan for future holidays.

Some HAF activities welcomed parents/carers as well, giving families the chance to spend quality time together developing new family memories.

***“Family day out with my children meant the world to us.”*** (Parent/carer)

This was particularly beneficial for families with SEND children, where siblings could also attend, meaning that families found activities they could all enjoy together. Where activities involved preparing and cooking food together, this helped some parents/carers learn new skills and gain new ideas, for example batch cooking and making meals stretch further.

***“Since coming here 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 in a Spag Bol 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”*** (Parent/carer)



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

*HAF provider: [Coneygre Arts Centre / Sandwell Youth Services](#)*

***"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."***



# Developing an equitable infrastructure for HAF

## Towards equitable access for families

The Sandwell HAF team and providers have significantly evolved since the HAF began, constantly and consistently addressing areas of inequity to better serve CYP and their families. By increasing cultural understanding, providers have created inclusive, welcoming spaces that reflect the diverse needs of the community. Improvements to the booking system have made it easier for families to access activities, though challenges remain for those facing digital and language barriers. Efforts to raise awareness of the programme through schools, social media, and community outreach have expanded its reach, yet gaps persist for families who are less connected. As the programme continues to grow, ongoing improvements in accessibility, communication, and engagement will help ensure that all eligible families can benefit from HAF support.

## Improving cultural understanding

The Sandwell HAF providers have mostly deepened understanding of different cultures, diverse community needs, and barriers to inclusion within their communities including newly arrived families and those who have experienced forced migration. There is evidence among providers of increased awareness of the inequalities surrounding intersections of race, ethnicity, disability, gender and class. This manifested as culturally inclusive food and activities that helped families feel represented and respected, and HAF providing safe, welcoming spaces where CYP, parents and carers felt like they belong.

*"A mother from Nigeria told me, 'You don't understand what it means to walk into a place, look different, and not be judged.'" (Provider)*

HAF providers increased their understanding of the complex reasons families experience hardship, including poverty, lack of access to opportunities, and language barriers.

*"There's a reason why people find themselves in the circumstances they are in... it's not just about food poverty, but about participation in society as a whole." (Provider)*

Those providers based in community centres recognised the importance of building trust within local communities, overcoming discrimination and exclusion, and learning from local communities as a means to increase support for more CYP and families. They often proactively recruited diverse staff from within their communities.

*"We had a transgender volunteer working in our crèche. Some parents initially had concerns, but after an open conversation, they said, 'I get to be who I want to be – so should she.'" (Provider)*



The children in this family attended various HAF activities at their local community centre, which kept them active and engaged during the holiday periods. As a result of bringing her children to the HAF, Mum found out about other provision offered by the provider, particularly English language classes.

HAF provider: [Epic CiC](#)

***“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, they enjoy more and it’s really good for the parents as well.”***

## Accessing HAF: booking system

In Winter 2022 an 'e vouchers' booking system was introduced, whereby schools assigned families codes which were issued on an agreed date by the central HAF team to all those CYP identified by the school to be eligible for HAF support. These codes could then be redeemed on the booking system to reserve activities.

Many parents and providers praised the booking process for its simplicity and accessibility, finding the process straightforward.

*91.6% of parents/carers agreed that they found it easy to book activities.*



However, challenges emerged. It highlighted a digital divide as while most parents and carers own mobile devices, they often don't use them to access websites or apps. Many found the process frustrating and confusing, expressing it would be easier to book multiple days and food options at once, and sharing that the booking system often reset itself.

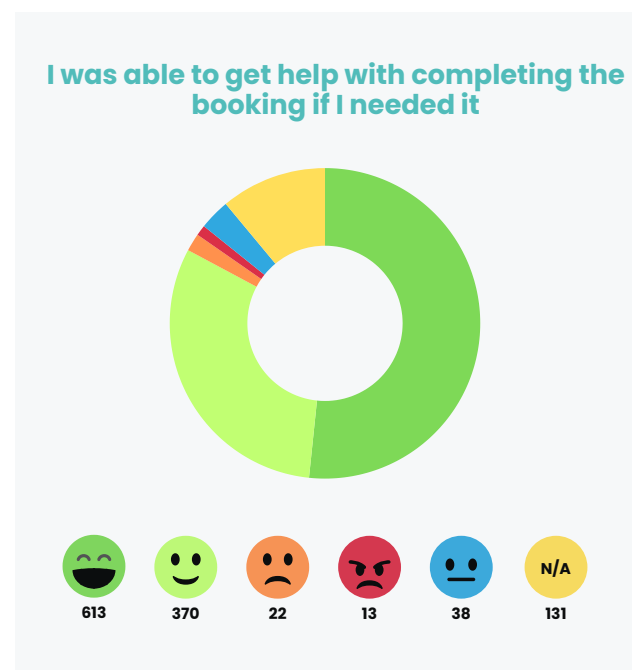
For SEND families competition for places was high, often leading to frustrations. Booking details didn't always clarify essential SEND-related information (e.g., toileting facilities, exits, parental stay options, sensory environment) making it difficult for parents/carers to make decisions about booking on the spot.

There was often confusion about eligibility criteria – particularly among families who were slightly above the benefits-related free school meal threshold, for siblings of children with SEND and for young carers. Families often missed out due to a lack of understanding about eligibility, or due to schools not informing them of their families' eligibility.

Barriers to booking often existed for parents/carers with English as an Additional Language, including how to access e-vouchers and understanding about their child's eligibility.

Despite these challenges, providers often went the extra mile to help families navigate the booking system, for example by inputting the information on behalf of families, or liaising with schools over voucher codes.

*Of 1187 parent/carer survey responses 51.6% strongly agreed and 31.2% agreed that they were able to get help with completing the booking if they needed it.*





For this family, being able to attend an activity that could be accessed by both of their children, one with SEND, was a particular highlight of the HAF. The family explained how the approach, kindness, care and inclusivity of the staff was critical to them all getting involved and feeling part of a community.

*HAF Provider: Ideal for All (Salop Drive Market Garden)*

***“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.”***

## Communicating the HAF

During the programme the Sandwell HAF team strengthened their marketing and communications capacity including implementing a social media campaign to raise awareness of activities, and utilising public health development workers to get information shared.

Schools have a critical role in signposting families to HAF, with 37% of families (who responded to the survey) learning about HAF activities through their child's school, and with some schools helping to target families who would benefit most. Each holiday period, more families used the HAF website (29.9% survey respondents), showing growing awareness and reliance on this resource. 13.8% of families found out about HAF through word of mouth, parents and children spread the word naturally when they enjoy HAF and have a positive experience, often encouraging others to join.

Successful marketing strategies included school 'takeover' days, promotion at the Shape Youth Festivals, a youth-led festival which was a means of accessing families directly, and Facebook campaigns.

However, gaps remained, particularly in reaching families who are not online, on social media, not connected to schools, or who face language barriers. Many families weren't aware of HAF until Year 3 of the programme, stating that more and better advertising is needed to make sure as many families as possible access the provision. Some families aren't on social media, or don't have easy internet access, and would prefer a printed flyer / newsletter.

***"My child came home every day with so many stories to tell. I got my friend to bring her kids, and they had so much fun too!" (Parent/carer)***



This family attended HAF at their local nursery, which was a place the son was already familiar with. Knowing the staff and the surroundings helped with overcoming his shyness. Providing these activities helped Mum have a break during long holiday periods.

HAF provider: [SADWICA day nursery](#)

***"It makes me happy, because he's so shy, I always think is he ever gonna be able to overcome that? And here, I can see his confidence building makes me, makes me happy, obviously."***

## Strengthening Sandwell's community organisations

The Sandwell HAF programme has been instrumental in strengthening the community organisations delivering HAF, helping them to expand their reach and enhance the quality of activities they offer. By providing grants, training, and networking opportunities, HAF has enabled providers to engage more families, improve their services, and sustain their operations. The programme has also supported organisations with grant applications, equipping them with the skills and experience needed to access further funding. Through collaboration, capacity-building, and a shared commitment to supporting children, young people, and families, HAF has fostered a strong network of community providers working together to create lasting impact.

### Increasing reach

The HAF programme has helped providers to enhance their regular activities and offer new experiences to CYP and families who may not have previously engaged with their services. Beyond just attendance, HAF has helped organisations strengthen and deepen relationships with families and increase engagement in other activities for CYP. One provider shared, "Each season of HAF, we see new families attend as well as returning young people. This allows us to build strong relationships with the families in the local area."

HAF has significantly increased awareness and access to other services providers offer – including adult services. One provider explained:

**"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 wouldn't have been able to access those activities."**

The programme has also gained traction with harder-to-reach families in the community, who are in some cases now making use of facilities and services.

Providers see long-term potential for HAF, with one stating, "These three years have helped our organisation keep running. Our numbers have increased, and we have regular attendees returning for each HAF programme" with another provider noting "We've only scratched the surface. HAF has the potential to reach even more people and provide even greater social impact."

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 have been able to expand their mailing lists of interested families to activities.

### Improving quality of activities

The HAF programme has played a crucial role in improving the quality and variety of activities offered by providers. One provider explained:

**"We offer a really wide breadth through HAF... working specifically with young women, developing an SEND family offer, running outdoor activities, residentials, and park programmes. HAF has allowed us to deliver this wide breadth of activities to a very wide and diverse community of young people."**

The Sandwell HAF team has noted a marked improvement in quality of the monitoring information since Year 1 with providers having improved policies, procedures, paperwork and a lead person on site during visits. The majority of providers reported the HAF monitoring system is clear, flexible, and easy to use, making it straightforward for providers to track impact and accountability. Providers typically used surveys, session sheets, social media platforms to gather real-time insights from children and families. Others captured photos and videos as evidence.

Despite its strengths, some gaps remain in capturing engagement data for example CYP voice, ensuring meaningful feedback.



This family has been accessing HAF activities with multiple providers during the holiday periods. All children have additional needs, meaning that Mum needs to carefully plan and evaluate which activities are suitable for them, and HAF has provided a cost effective way of meeting the needs of all of the family. As a result the children have developed friendships with other children, experienced new things and kept active.

HAF provider: [Forge Mill Farm](#)

***“Holidays can be really challenging. But with the HAF, everything's been nice because we have 25 activities, and that's like, we had horse riding, we had abseiling, we've had farm on wheels.”***



## Expanding and upskilling staff

***“All of the training that has been offered and that we have received for the running of the programme has been amazing and very beneficial.”*** (Provider)

The Sandwell HAF programme has helped providers expand their teams of staff and volunteers. This has often involved upskilling local people, in some cases creating pathways from volunteering to paid employment. The programme has also led to new training and recruitment opportunities, such as supporting volunteers to gain qualifications.

***“One of our staff started as a volunteer, moved to full-time employment, and is now completing Level 3 in Social Healthcare.”*** (Provider)

Providers highlight how the HAF experience often benefits staff as much as young people, developing professional skills, learning from peers and sharing resources. Provider delivery staff recruitment includes DBS checks, safeguarding, first aid, and sector-specific training. Professional development and training has been an important part of organisational growth as it results in there being more trained people on the ground. Some providers value the range of training opportunities offered by the central HAF team, which help them deliver high-quality holiday provision.

## Accessing HAF funding and beyond

For many providers, HAF funding helped with sustaining the organisation, resources and staffing, and in some cases the experience of applying for and managing HAF grants was a stepping stone to larger funding applications such as Big Lottery Awards for All. Providers praised the central Sandwell HAF team for support with funding applications and understanding about criteria, praising the support and responsiveness of the team:

***“I had a question about applications, and within minutes, I had an email back saying, ‘I can give you a call right now.’ That’s really unusual for funders.”*** (Provider)

However, providers have struggled to maintain the same level of service as budgets get smaller, costs get higher and the ‘real’ cost of HAF (particularly considering the above and beyond support providers often put in) often outweighs the funding available.

Some providers found the application process complicated, although appreciate the need for rigour to ensure quality and safeguarding. The short application-to-funding decision timelines often meant difficulties with planning.

***“If we had funding confirmed at the start of the year, we could plan much better.”*** (Provider)

There was also a place payment introduced in 2023 at £25 per regular child place and £30 per place for SEND CYP which created confusion, although providers stated that the HAF team supported with this.

A major issue for providers has been families booking but not turning up, often leading to wasted places, food and having to pay staff regardless.

## Programme sustainability

The HAF programme has been of benefit to providers, helping them understand costs, demand, and capacity for future planning. Despite funding uncertainties, its impact on staffing, service expansion, and community relationships is undeniable. However, many providers fear what happens to CYP and families during the holidays when funding stops especially as the programme is only just beginning to become established within communities. There is unanimous agreement from providers that families would be unable to pay for holiday activities, even at a heavily subsidised rate. Providers themselves are also suffering from cost of living increases, with some sharing significant rises in rental costs and food costs even during the course of the HAF programme.

***“We don’t know what funding will be available in the future. If that funding doesn’t exist, then HAF doesn’t exist.”*** (Provider)



For many older young people having HAF sports camps have been important times to socialise, and relieve holiday boredom. These three young people appreciated the fact that the leaders were young, and encouraged them to join in. This helped develop their own leadership skills and confidence.

HAF Provider: [Sport4Life](#)

***“We learnt leadership skills and like, you can become more confident. The leaders will, like, show you how to be more confident, and you can talk to more people, and do more sports. So if you’re not good at a sport, you can try and get better.”***

## The Strength of the 'HAF Family'

Going forward, providers feel that collaboration and partnerships are key to sustainability – building on the sense of community that has been seeded through the HAF programme. 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; conferences, one-to-one support and regularly sharing and signposting information about providers via the HAF social media.

*"It's fantastic for our service – it gives us the opportunity to enhance the offer to young people, deliver a really positive and varied programme."* (Provider)

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.

*"After the first year, they listened to us, and changes were made. There was another forum, everyone had a learning opportunity together, and the booking system was improved."*

(Provider)

In some cases meeting and networking with other providers has opened up working opportunities and collaborations for example:

*"At the HAF network partnership meeting, I met a boxing coach who specialises in working with disabled people. He's now hopefully coming to do sessions with our youth group, which is brilliant because they are outside of this offer."* (Provider)

All of this has contributed to creating a Sandwell HAF 'Family' feel across the community.



The children in this family were excited to attend the HAF programme, to mix with different children from different schools, to learn new things and to go on trips. For Mum, she has peace of mind that they are in a safe place due to the HAF programme being in a school environment.

HAF Provider: [4Community Trust @ 4CT The Hub](#)

***“The friends they make it’s had a good effect on them and they learn different things. At home we can only just go to the park, but here they are really doing a lot and we have no words to appreciate them, to say thankyou.”***

## How HAF has improved

While the impact of HAF has been overwhelmingly positive, parents/carers and providers shared the following opportunities for improvement over time, which the Sandwell HAF team responded to where possible.

### Parents/carers and providers said...

More activities are needed for older young people. Activity sessions should be extended to longer than four hours and for a greater portion of the holidays, and there should be more variety of activities available.

More variety in the food offer is needed, including more hot meal availability and foods reflecting diverse communities.

SEND support was limited for some families with competition for places being high, particularly for CYP with profound and multiple disabilities. Many providers were unable to accept children with higher support needs (e.g., 1:1 care, toileting support, peg feeding). Families didn't always disclose their child's needs during booking, making it difficult for providers to accommodate CYP if they didn't have adequate staffing, expertise and resources. A minority of negative staff experiences were reported, where children felt left out, unrecognised, or discouraged, leading them to not return.

### Sandwell HAF team did...

The Sandwell HAF team increased and diversified the number and type of activity providers over time, including working with Sandwell Youth Services on open access park and recreation programmes and with secondary schools to increase focus on older young people. The HAF offer has grown each year to include cultural activities, trips outside of Sandwell, outdoor education programmes and qualifications. Some providers now deliver full day sessions to meet the needs of parents/carers.

The Department for Education guidelines changed during the HAF programme to introduce more flexibility to offer cold meals. The Sandwell HAF team and providers maintained a commitment to providing a hot food offer where possible to ensure nutritional meals that reflect diverse food cultures. However this remains an ongoing area for development.

The Sandwell HAF team increased the number of SEND spaces over time but fully recognise this demand requires addressing and resourcing nationally. Training, development and support for providers working with SEND CYP increased, including a conference targeting frontline practitioners with the theme of inclusive practice.

## Parents/carers and providers said...

There were issues with the booking system, particularly for those facing digital poverty and/or language barriers. More clarity was needed around eligibility and access to voucher codes from schools, and more information about accessibility and structure of the activities for parents/carers of SEND CYP. Not all families could access digital advertising/marketing materials meaning that many didn't hear about HAF activities until the third year of the programme.

Providers felt that monitoring was effective overall but needs to be more efficient and impactful. Challenges reported included being asked for duplicate information between the application forms and from the monitoring officers, monitoring officers visiting at difficult times (for example mealtimes), and not assessing the quality of childcare.

While HAF training is valued, providers suggested areas for improvement included more specialist training (autism, first aid, food hygiene for example), more support for staff to manage their mental health in light of the pressures they face, and more work to define quality SEND provision.

Some providers have concerns over how funding is allocated, and how to achieve a balance of ensuring HAF programmes in all areas of Sandwell, without compromising quality.

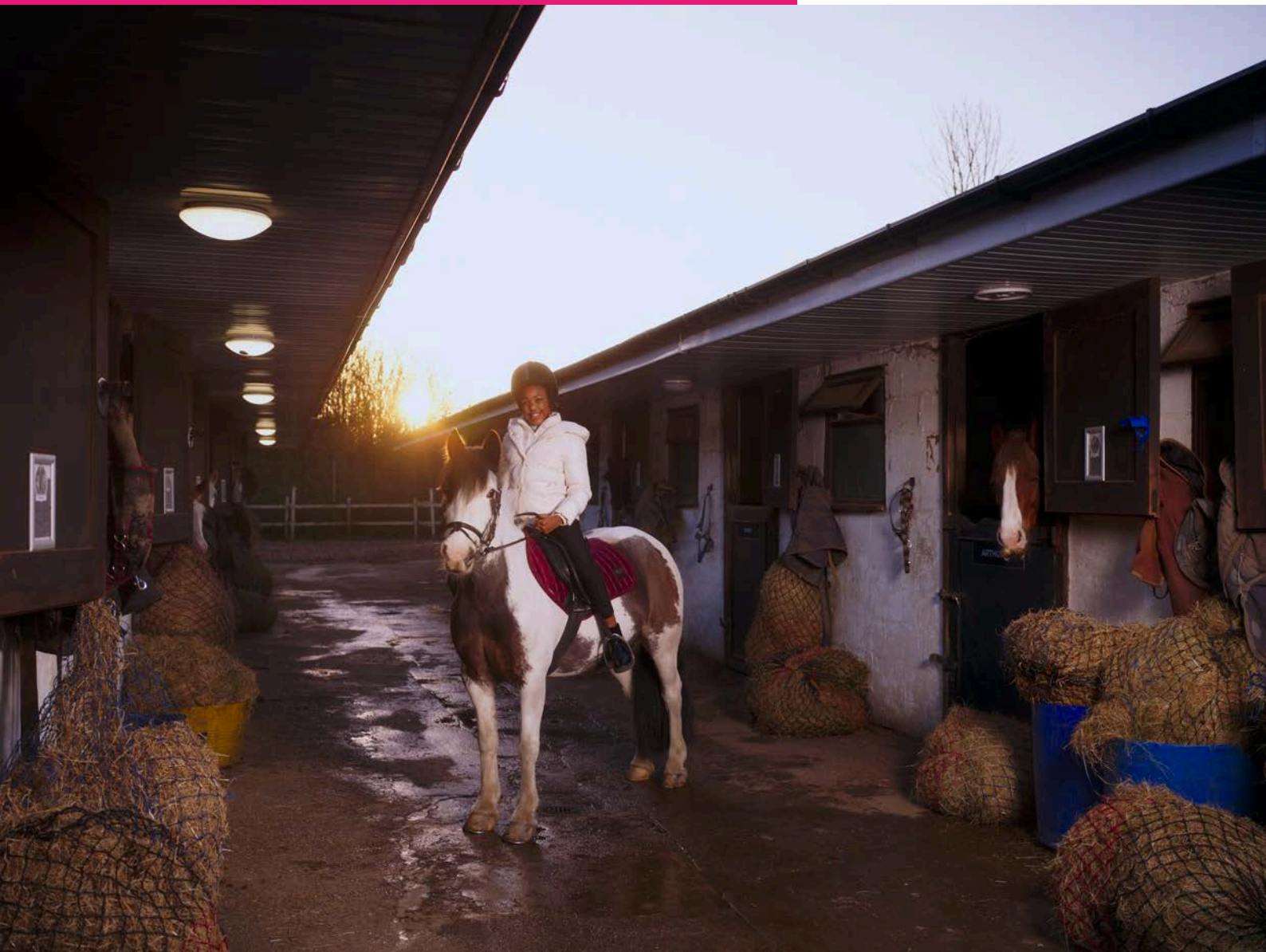
## Sandwell HAF team did...

The booking system was updated after each HAF holiday period, taking into account feedback from parents/carers and providers. This included adding a translation function and simplifying the process. The HAF team increased and improved engagement with schools and now 99% of schools assign e-vouchers by the distribution date. The HAF team also increased their presence in schools and communities (through school roadshows, parents evenings, community events etc) to raise awareness of HAF.

The application and monitoring process has been simplified and aligned to ensure organisations have more clarity around what to provide. The reporting and booking platforms have also been amalgamated to reduce duplication of information.

As above, the Sandwell HAF team have listened to providers and increased training opportunities. However there has consistently been a low take-up to training opportunities meaning this is an ongoing area for review and development.

New providers aren't able to deliver HAF activities out of centres or venues that existing providers are already delivering in. The Sandwell HAF team regularly conducts a gap analysis of where there is limited provision, and tries to encourage organisations to deliver provision in these areas, but there is still work to do.



Having opportunities such as horse riding available through the HAF provision has been important to this young person and her Mum, especially seeing her daughter so happy, engaged and enthusiastic as a result. The presence of horses at the HAF provision was a positive focus, and a way of overcoming shyness for the young person.

*HAF Provider: Warren's Hall Riding School*

***"I was just really happy to come back and have my daughter 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."***

# Summary

## **1. HAF transformed holidays for thousands of children and families**

The Sandwell HAF programme provided a lifeline for many Sandwell families, offering safe spaces, exciting activities, nutritious food, and routine for children and young people (CYP), particularly those from low-income families, CYP with SEND, or most vulnerable CYP. 99% of parents/carers agreed their child enjoyed the experience.

## **2. Children and young people grew in confidence, developed skills and increased aspiration**

Through sports, arts, trips, and hands-on learning, many CYP developed life skills, made friends, and gained exposure to new ideas and positive role models. Many found new hobbies and interests, increased their self-esteem and wellbeing, and some began mentoring others.

## **3. HAF reduced stress for families and supported mental health**

HAF offered more than just the DfE intended outcomes for children and young people – it gave parents and carers respite, time to rest, study, work, and to access other services. 91.8% of providers said HAF improved family mental health.

## **4. Food was more than a meal – it was an experience**

Many CYP learned how to cook, try new foods, and understand healthy eating. Parents/carers reported changed habits at home, with some learning to batch cook or stretch meals through HAF-inspired recipes.

## **5. Friendship, fun, and belonging were at the heart of HAF**

CYP made friends, developed social skills, and felt safe to be themselves – including those with additional needs and/or from underrepresented communities. HAF helped combat social isolation and created lasting childhood memories.

## **6. Local providers went above and beyond – despite stretched resources**

Providers delivered high-quality, inclusive sessions and personal support to children and families, often on tight budgets and timeframes.

## **7. Barriers still exist for some families**

While access improved during the HAF programme, families with digital, language, or other barriers still struggled to book sessions. More needs to be done to ensure truly equitable access – especially for CYP with higher support needs.

## **8. HAF strengthened community infrastructure but needs long-term security**

Funding, training, and networking empowered local organisations to grow and collaborate. However many are concerned about what will happen if Government funding ends, as the current offer is not sustainable without it.

### **HAF: What next?**

To build on the success of HAF, we must expand what works and improve what doesn't:

- 1) Extend sessions beyond 4 hours and over more of the holiday periods
- 2) Deliver even more activities for older young people
- 3) Improve access and support for SEND and most vulnerable CYP
- 4) Secure long-term funding so providers can plan, sustain and evolve
- 5) Strengthen community partnerships to keep delivering high-impact, inclusive provision



# About the evaluation

A Theory of Change was established during Year 1 in collaboration with the Sandwell HAF project team and providers, and reviewed at the beginning of Years 2 and 3. Following this process 14 intended outcomes were agreed for the programme which the evaluation sought to evidence.

## **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

## **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/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 have proved effective.**

## Methods

The evaluation used a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data with a robust qualitative approach anchored in the Equitable Evaluation Framework to advance equity. Guided by the British Educational Research 2018 Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, the evaluation prioritised the comfort of children and families. Recognising sensitivities around authority and trust, interviews were often conducted in relaxed, familiar settings – whether playing with children, walking and talking, over coffee in a café or in a sensory space.

Evaluation activity during the period April 2022 – January 2025 included: parent/carer online surveys following holiday periods (1187 responses); provider online surveys (98 responses); family interviews (47 parents/carers; 82 CYP); and provider interviews (35). It also involved informal visits to HAF providers and activities, reflective conversations with the Sandwell HAF team, and evaluation workshops at HAF provider network gatherings.

Alongside family interviews, portrait photographer Emile Holba created 41 portraits to capture the authentic lives and stories of Sandwell families. Families chose their preferred settings – typically where HAF activities occurred – and co-created their portraits. This process resulted in images that truly represented the families and young people involved. Consent was secured from 26 of the families to share their portraits and stories in this report, and at an exhibition at Sandwell Valley Country Park (April 2025).

A focus group of families was established who advised on the format and content of this report, co-wrote the foreword, and advised on making the exhibition inclusive.

## 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. 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 all 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 anti-racist consultant 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 aware of how we entered into spaces where we were different from families particularly regarding ethnicity, class, gender, disability and neuro-divergence.

## Evaluation team

Lead evaluator / report author: **Abigail D'Amore**

Portrait photographer: **Emile Holba**

Anti-racist consultant / evaluator: **Liz Pemberton**

Theory of Change consultant: **Jennifer Raven**

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## 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. The evaluation would not have been possible without the cooperation and time of the Sandwell HAF provider leaders and teams, notably:**

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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.

## HAF Providers

**Since April 2022 the following organisations have delivered HAF provision across Sandwell:**

4 Community Trust – Schools; 4 Community Trust – SEND; African French Speaking Community Support; All Stars Walsall CiC; Aspire Active Camps Ltd; Bangladeshi Women's Association; Bearwood Community Hub CiC; Benson Community Project Association; Brandhall Primary School; Brasshouse Community Centre; Centre Spot CiC; Chess Mate Hub Ltd; Chaplin's Panto; Christ Church Primary School; CNC Dance; Community Action Project; Community Connect Foundation; Confederation of Bangladeshi Organisations; Creative Active Lives CiC; Dynamic Kids; Earls Gymnastics; Eco Chest T/A Little Bears' Playhouse; ELP Sports LTD; Energ!se Ltd; EPIC CiC (Empowering People in Change); EXCELR8 SCE C.I.C; Fantastic Journeys CiC; Fits4Schools Ta Premier Education; Forge Mill Farm; Friar Park Millenium Centre; G.A.P Entertainment CiC; Genius! Tuition; George Salter Academy; Grove Vale Primary School; Hill Top Community Development; Holly Lodge High School; Ideal For All; Junior Adventures Group; KIDS; ILeys Community Association; Life in Community CiC; Limitless Fitness Centre C.I.C; Lion Farm Action Centre; Male Family Group Ltd T/A Warrens Hall Riding School; New Creativity CiC; Oldbury United; Places for Leisure; P&E Sports Redditch LTD; Pilot IMS Limited Precious Times Day Nursery; Premier Education; RB Sports Activities; Oldbury United: Sam's Gym / Oldbury Academy; Sandwell & District West Indian Community Association Ltd (Sadwica); Sandwell Asian Development Association (West Brom Boxing Club); Sandwell Asian Family Support (SAFS); Sandwell Children's Trust; Sandwell Leisure Trust; Malthouse Outdoor Activity Centre; Sandwell MBC Youth Service: Coneygre Arts Centre; Sandwell Residential Education Centre; Sandwell Valley; Sandwell Young Carers; Smethwick Youth & Community Centre; Sport 4 Life; Sporting Spirit & First Touch Coaching CiC; Sporting Your Futures CiC; Sports Plus Scheme; Strike9T CiC; The Abrahamic Foundation; The Albion Foundation; The Great Bridge Community Forum; Tibbington Tenants & Residents Association; Time Step Dance; Vibes N' Shine CiC; West Smethwick Enterprise; Wood Green Community Centre; Yemeni Community Association; YMCA Black Country Group.