



Sandwell Holiday Activities and Food Programme

Evaluation summary: 2024 – 2025

The Sandwell Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme aims to support disadvantaged families during the school holidays by providing healthy meals and enriching activities to young people. (Source: Department for Education).

During 2024–2025 56,737 sessions were booked across three holiday periods (Easter, Summer and Winter) by 137 providers. A total of 12,254 children and young people (CYP) attended (36.65% of the total population of Sandwell CYP). Of these 93% (n=21,806) qualified for benefits-related free school meals.

This independent evaluation by Abigail D'Amore Associates expands on the 2022–2023 and 2023 – 2024 reports, strengthening existing findings and highlighting new evidence towards intended outcomes.

Evaluation activity during Year 3 included: parent/carer survey data from Easter (126 responses), Summer (311 responses), Winter (117 responses) holiday periods; provider survey (56 responses); family interviews (19 parents/carers; 25 CYP); provider interviews (8); portrait capture with families (16). It also involved informal visits and observations to HAF providers and HAF activities to build relationships and for contextual understanding, and evaluation/critical friend work at HAF network events.



Accessing activities together is important for this family – and the HAF has provided opportunities to create family memories that are affordable. Mum explains the children have all grown in confidence, experienced new foods that they've since tried at home and made new friends. The welcoming staff have been 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. I prefer being able to go together rather than drop them off."

A breadth of activities and opportunities

98% of parents/carers would recommend the HAF programme to other families. 97% of parents/carers agreed that there was an excellent variety of activities available for their CYP.

Over the three-year period, Sandwell HAF offered a wide variety of activity options for children and young people (CYP). Activities ranged from sports and crafts to horse riding, chess, and music, with parents appreciating the new experiences and opportunities. *"Brilliant absolutely love it wouldn't go no where else so many activities so much for the kids to do cannot fault it."* (Parent/carer)

Engagement and enthusiasm

The HAF had a positive impact on CYP's enjoyment, with consistent feedback from parents, carers, providers, and young people themselves highlighting high levels of happiness and engagement. CYP looked forward to attending sessions, discovered new interests, and expressed excitement about returning. The sense of joy was a recurring theme, often mentioned alongside praise for supportive staff and inclusive environments. *"My son was so happy every time he did these... He made friends each time. He is hoping this will be on all holidays from now on."* (Parent/carer)

Participation

CYPs confidence grew through their participation in the programme, while some families shared how their CYP began dancing, biking, and swimming for example – often new activities: *"Confidence has gone up a lot, even down to small things like riding the bike... she would never do these thing before."* (Parent/carer)

As with previous years, parents would like there to be more age appropriate activities for older young people, and longer activities (more than 4 hours and for more of the holidays).

Creating memories

"We want to give every child the best day of their lives every single day." (Provider)

HAF activities often created lasting memories and unlocked new opportunities and adventures—whether trying canoeing or baking for the first time, or experiencing festive surprises like Santa visits. *"Amazing opportunities for my children to try new things."* (Parent/carer)

Beyond the structured activities, the space to play, imagine, and connect with others proved invaluable. These moments helped children bond, grow in confidence, and just be kids. *"They let us play all the way into lunchtime... then we do activities as well."* (Young person)

Benefits of being active

Being active during the holidays through HAF has a positive impact on CYP's physical and mental wellbeing, often providing meaningful alternatives to screen time and encouraging healthier habits. From exploring nature to participating in structured sports and playful activities, CYP were regularly engaged in activities that enhanced fitness and stamina as well as emotional resilience. One parent/carer shared, *"He's more active. He likes to do more instead of just wanting to sit around all day on games... I've noticed he's keeping up the activeness, which we try to encourage anyway."*

Provision of healthy food

86% of parents/carers agreed that the quality of the food that their child received was good.

The HAF programme has had a positive impact on CYP's relationship with food, broadening their experiences and improving their understanding of nutrition. CYP enjoyed the variety and quality of meals provided, often trying foods they previously refused at home. One parent/carer observed, *"they won't eat at home but will try anything here... Watching him eat this (roasted veg frittata and homemade tomato sauce/pasta) has blown my mind."*

Where providers encouraged mealtimes where CYP sat and ate together, sometimes in a restaurant setting, this supported with CYP learning the value of shared mealtimes. The programme didn't just feed CYP; it often nurtured positive food habits, social experiences, and in some cases this extended into family life.

As with previous years, there was a call from parents/carers for more variety of food, including cultural preferences, and a dissatisfaction with some of the cold food options.



The HAF has 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 has led to the children continuing with hobbies beyond the holidays with Mum sharing it has helped them become brave to try new things.

“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.”

HAF provider: Chess Mate

Supporting children and young peoples' mental health and wellbeing

95% of providers agreed or strongly agreed that the mental health of CYP improved as a result of the HAF programme. 99% of parents/carers agreed that their child enjoyed the activities.

Social skills and friendships

99% of parents/carers agreed that their child socialised with others during the HAF activities. Many parents, carers and providers reported that CYP became more confident in social settings, often forming new relationships with other CYP and/or with staff. *"Being part of HAF helped him gain confidence and have friends that he looks forward to seeing at HAF."* (Parent/carers)

CYP often mixed with others from different schools, backgrounds, and even geographical areas. *"I made some new friends. I met some more people to play with."* (Young person). For others, mixing with like-minded peers was a positive experience, especially for CYP with specific interests or needs, for example those who are young carers, or who have siblings with SEND.

HAF has played an important role in helping some CYP with social anxiety feel more comfortable entering new environments. Parents/carers consistently reported their CYP becoming more relaxed through their time at HAF, for example: *"As a parent to a child who has social anxiety and doesn't receive much support for it externally, [Provider] has been a provision beyond helpful."* For many CYP, this was the first time they had participated in a group setting, and the nurturing environment helped them begin to overcome shyness and fear of social interaction.

Structure and routine

The HAF programme has provided many CYP and families with a structure and consistency during school holidays, helping maintain routine and purpose in a time that can sometimes feel unstructured or isolating. One provider shared, *"It's about the children having somewhere to go, feel wanted, feeling needed, and having that consistency like they have at school."*

The activities helped relieve boredom, and kept CYP engaged and active. This parent/carers shared the mental and emotional benefit of HAF activities, sharing how: *"he's better, he's more positive. He's happier when he comes away from it."*

"I have seen a dramatic difference in her, as a person... she has come out of her shell a lot."
(Parent/carers)



The HAF provision has helped low income working families, whose children have been able to attend. These two single-parent families claim 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 learn new things. They particularly value the inclusive approach this provider takes, and the reassurance this provides them.

"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."

Development of skills

98% of providers agreed that CYP developed new skills (including play) through the HAF programme and 93% of parents/carers agreed that their child learnt something new. Through enrichment activities provided through the HAF programme, CYP learnt practical knowledge such as how to play chess or guitar, through to creative expression through dance or similar activities.

CYP also developed life skills such as communication, confidence, and problem-solving. Some even showed leadership potential, like one CYP who progressed from participating in pony grooming to supporting and guiding other CYP. One young person also reflected on future aspirations, saying they hoped to volunteer after Year 11: *"I love spending my time with like animals and like nature. So it'd be a really good like volunteering thing."* (Young person)

Increasing aspiration

HAF has helped increase aspiration for some CYP. Following the sessions, many CYP pursued new interests for example joining dance/sport/cheerleading classes. One parent/carer described: *"She'd come home and she'd been watching videos on cheerleading... it was obviously a whole world that she'd never really tapped into before."* One provider shared how a CYP began to reflect on their future during a HAF session, saying the experience *"was an opportunity for them to really think about what they could become."*

Confidence and self esteem

Across various sessions, CYP gained confidence not only socially but in their abilities, leadership, and willingness to try new things. Whether through learning sports, standing up for themselves, or participating in group activities, CYP built a stronger sense of self-esteem. One parent/carer reflected, *"His confidence, suddenly, it's just gone through the roof,"* and young people described how they were more confident speaking and engaging with others.

The programme has supported some children in overcoming significant personal challenges. One provider told the story of a CYP with a brain tumour who was initially shy but, after bonding with staff and peers, flourished over the course of the week and continued to attend, building resilience.

Staff and parents/carers reported seeing CYP blossom during their time in HAF. CYP who were initially quiet and withdrawn were often confidently engaging in group play and new activities by the end. *"It brings the kids out of themselves—especially the ones that were always quiet when they first come in."* (Volunteer)

For CYP who struggle with behaviour or emotional regulation, the structure of HAF provided routine and stability. One parent/carer described a profound change in their child: *"It's almost changed our life... the summers were unbearable... but now he gets ready the same time every morning and picks up the same time. It's like a school routine."*





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

"She always comes home smiling and happy. Her face says it all."

HAF Provider: 4Community Trust @ 4CT The Hub

Providing safe spaces and trusted adults

98% of providers agreed that the HAF programme provided supportive and safe spaces for families to leave their children and 100% of parents/carers agreed that staff were approachable and friendly.

Families consistently praised the welcoming and comfortable spaces where HAF activities took place. One parent/carer shared, *"Everyone is really friendly and the environment is lovely."*

CYP and families felt at home often due to staff being from the same communities and backgrounds as the CYP. One provider explained, *"We have a team that either live in the area or grew up in the area, or have worked with us before,"* which strengthened trust, familiarity, and cultural understanding.

Staff were often seen as relatable and approachable – which was cited as being different from school – helping CYP feel more at ease. Many had volunteered previously and had long-standing relationships with the community, fostering authentic connections.

Children were warmly welcomed into spaces often remembered by name—even from previous years. *"They know each child's name... really happy, always like engaging with the children."* (Parent/carer)

Parents/carers highlighted how staff consistently exceeded expectations, ensuring children felt valued and seen. One described how staff *"treat each child as an individual,"* while another shared that the team *"go an extra mile."*

A SEND inclusive approach

During 2024–2025 HAF 1,514 SEND CYP attended HAF, which was an increase from the previous year.

Inclusivity is central to HAF, creating environments where all CYP – regardless of background, ability, or experience – could feel able to thrive. One parent /carer noted, *"It was inclusive for all my children."* For many, this sense of belonging helped CYP build confidence and make friends. As one provider explained, *"We don't make a point of children being different, everyone is just a child."*

HAF staff showed care and adaptability in supporting CYP with SEND. Many families shared how their children—often excluded elsewhere—were embraced and included. One parent/carer shared, *"My child managed to do activities that would ordinarily be difficult... but the staff know how to accommodate him."* Staff often went above and beyond in supporting CYP with additional needs, offering personalised care and adjusting where necessary.

CYP were free to be themselves, especially those who often struggle in traditional settings. One provider shared: *"We can give them somewhere where they just feel completely accepted for who they are... it's about them feeling safe to be themselves."*

***"My child usually finds new environments challenging but... he's been comfortable and in his element."* (Parent/carer)**



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.

"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."

HAF provider: Friar Park Millenium Centre

Generating a sense of belonging

99% of parents/carers agreed that their child felt included at the HAF activities.

The HAF programme created a safe, inclusive space where CYP could play, learn, and socialise without fear or pressure, positively supporting their mental and physical wellbeing. Providers noted the importance of offering a consistent, secure space where children could feel at ease, for example: *"The HAF programme provides a safe space where they can engage in activities and be with friends."* This sense of safety was particularly important during the darker winter months and in communities where few safe spaces exist.

Parents expressed trust in the HAF staff and environment, with many sharing that it was the first time they had felt comfortable leaving their children, including those with complex needs. One parent/carer shared, *"I never leave my son alone, however with this group I felt at ease to leave him."* Another said, *"I felt she was safe and well cared for. It gave me a break... knowing she was safe and enjoying herself."* Staff's understanding of SEND and their welcoming, communicative approach helped families feel confident and reassured.

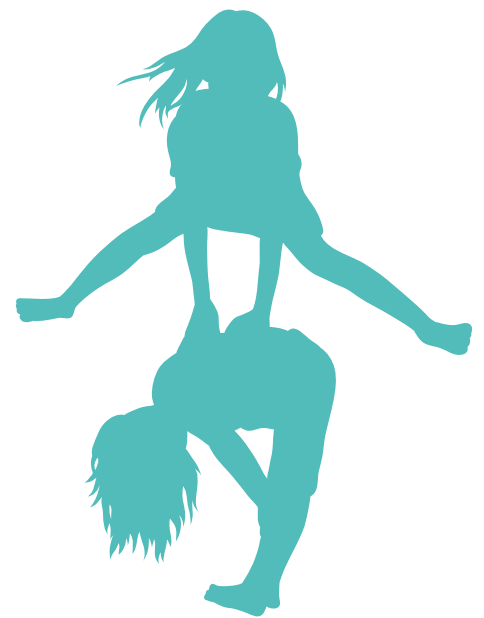
CYP not only felt physically secure but also emotionally safe to express themselves and open up. As a provider shared, *"They may be quiet but they know they can come and talk to one of us... Sometimes they can't talk to mum."* This trust allowed CYP to feel heard, supported, and valued.

Challenges

While many families and providers praised the inclusivity of the HAF programme, there remain challenges in supporting children and young people with SEND, especially those with higher-level or complex needs. Communication gaps, such as parents not disclosing full information about child's needs, or the lack of visual tools like communication boards, could hinder providers' ability to deliver safe and tailored care.

Several providers acknowledged that while their services were accessible to some SEND children, they were not equipped to meet more complex needs, such as PEG feeding, flight risk behaviours, or high-level personal care. As one provider admitted, *"We are inclusive to a certain level... but obviously that was like another level of inclusion that we couldn't cater for."*

This leaves a significant gap in provision, where families of CYP with more complex needs feel excluded or are unsure about whether a providers' activities are suitable. There were also minimal isolated concerns over unsafe environments, poor staff conduct, and lack of adequate supervision, all of which contributed to a sense of mistrust among some parents/carers. To address this, clearer expectations, more training, increased funding, and improved communication are needed.





This family accessed a SEND sports camp. It was the first time Mum had left her son to a holiday activity, and was impressed by how caring the staff were, meaning she felt comfortable with leaving him. His confidence has 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."

Increasing financial and emotional support for families

It is becoming increasingly evident that the Sandwell HAF is providing a vital and sustained support service for the whole family. 98% of parents/carers agreed that having these activities available helped them more broadly.

Providers played an often critical role in supporting families beyond the delivery of holiday activities, offering practical help, building trust, and connecting them to wider services. Many families facing financial hardship were supported with essentials such as food hampers, activity packs, and advice on cost-of-living support. One parent/carer shared, *"The hampers and activity packs helps out a lot,"* while another said, *"Brilliant idea – a way to help struggling families."*

"We have formed strong bonds with our families and have good parent partnership to be able to assist them to sign up/introduce them to other services." (Provider)

Respite and emotional wellbeing

89% of providers agreed that the HAF programme has contributed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of families: *"Happy child, happy mommy, thank you."* (Parent/carer).

Families felt reassured that their CYP were in safe, enriching environments. Activities gave CYP something meaningful to do, kept them active, and supported their development which in turn supported their parents/carers. *"My child got to keep active, socialising and learning... it made me feel better,"* (Parent/carer).

HAF also provided respite for families during often intense school holiday periods: *"My children were positive when attending... it also gives myself a little break."* (Parent/carer)

Families sharing activities together

HAF brought joy and connection to some families by creating opportunities to participate in activities together – for example through cooking sessions or day trips – that families wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise. One parent/carer said, *"Family day out with my children meant the world to us,"* and another shared, *"It's creating a better family relationship... we do fight if we're indoors all day."*

For parents/carers of CYP with SEND the opportunity for siblings to access activities together had whole-family benefits, and sometimes removed some of the isolation some SEND families can experience.

Relieved financial pressure during cost of living crisis

The HAF programme has been a lifeline for many families struggling with the rising cost of living, reducing the financial burden of keeping CYP entertained during the holidays.

Parents/carers described the savings, with one explaining: *"Before I found out about HAF... it costs at least £200 for odd days out. And now everything's paid apart from my transport."*

Others shared how the programme supported financially by providing structured activities and food, ensuring CYP were engaged while minimising holiday costs for families. Providers also recognised the ongoing pressures, particularly during winter holidays, with one stating, *"Families are still struggling with the cost of living issues and it is impacting them more now than it has in previous years."*



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."

Support for low-income working families

HAF has also helped low-income working parents/carers who would otherwise struggle to manage childcare. One parent/carer shared: *"I wouldn't be able to survive without it... I would not be able to work if it wasn't for this."*

For some parents/carers, HAF created time and space for them to be able to study or access training, increasing employability status. *"HAF allows me to complete online training whilst my child is entertained... I start my new job in two weeks,"* (Parent/carer).

Mixing with families experiencing similar challenges/situations

For some families the HAF fostered a sense of community. Families of children with SEND, in particular, valued the chance to connect with others facing similar challenges. *"It feels really good to share our stories with siblings who has got their loved ones with special education needs... we're forever grateful."* This sense of belonging and shared understanding helped reduce isolation and built peer support networks.

Strengthening referral pathways and support mechanisms

91% of providers stated that they had been able to help families to navigate towards other support / services as a direct result of them bringing their children to HAF activities. 95% of providers agreed that the HAF programme has increased families' awareness of other services and opportunities available to them.

Having engagement from wider council and community services, for example early help, means that the HAF is becoming an important link in the referral pathway, particularly for those families needing statutory or social care support, with the anticipated benefit of this being a reduction in referrals into targeted services.





This family has been accessing HAF activities since they started. 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."

Developing a Sandwell HAF ‘family’

The network of providers delivering HAF activity has continued to grow and strengthen as a community during 2024–2025. Much of the HAF provision is delivered within community spaces often led by staff who are representative, or who have deep understanding, of the communities that they are serving.

During 2024–2025 providers further enhanced their understanding of Sandwell’s communities. Providers shared that the HAF programme has helped them improve their understanding of how to support different cultures for example by recruiting diverse staff, and offering cultural workshops and food as part of HAF. However, challenges were still reported around language barriers for example.

Towards equitable access for providers

During 2024–2025 137 organisations received funding with an average grant award of £6,757 (Easter), £16,401.40 (Summer) and £4,835.50 (Winter).

Respondents generally found it easy to get involved with the HAF programme and praised the support from the HAF team, particularly in helping with funding applications and offering guidance. One provider noted, “The funding has been an amazing opportunity to help local families,” while another shared how HAF data helped them secure 12 months of additional funding. The programme has also strengthened partnerships and introduced new families to services. However, challenges included a lack of clarity around funding changes, tighter per-place budgets, and short timescales between receiving funding and delivering activities. Some also highlighted concerns around securing future funding for universal places and planning beyond 2025.

Marketing and communications

30% of families stated they learnt about HAF activities through their child/children’s schools, highlighting the critical role of schools with signposting and engaging families. 33% found out about activities through the HAF website, with 13% via word of mouth, 8% through marketing material in local communities, and 9% via Facebook.

Booking E-voucher system

91% of parents/carers agreed that they found it easy to book activities with 91% of parents/carers agreeing that communication about the e-vouchers system was clear.

The HAF booking system was praised by many families for its ease of use, particularly among those already familiar with the process. One parent /carer shared, *“Actually, quite a good system... they give me access to book him on sort of early, even before I get his HAF code.”* It was particularly effective when there was also direct contact with providers, and support offered where needed.

However, challenges remain, especially for families of CYP with SEND, those with limited digital access, or those who receive codes from schools too late to secure places. One parent/carer of an SEND child explained, *“There’s 200–300 children fighting for 25 spaces... if you’ve got a child with higher care needs, you can’t book a slot because you need to confirm that childcare before—and then the ticket’s gone.”* Parents also highlighted problems with system navigation, vague activity descriptions, and a lack of accessible information for SEND-specific provision. Some also called for improved support from schools, with one noting, *“I’m not sure that schools are fully aware of which children are eligible.”* Despite these barriers, 79% of parents/carers stated they were able to get help with the booking if needed, with 76% saying the support they received was helpful and any issues were resolved.

Refining monitoring systems

The HAF programme has helped strengthen monitoring systems by encouraging providers to better track engagement, feedback, and the impact of their activity offerings. Providers noted improvements in understanding what works, driven by the need to evidence outcomes and reach. Monitoring systems have helped providers gather feedback, with many providers using tools like Google Forms, photos/videos, and evaluation workshops to document progress and celebrate success. One provider shared, *"Feedback is so inspiring... it can pick you up and remind you why you work in this sector."*

However, challenges remain with the formal monitoring process, including time constraints and limited resources. Some specific childcare providers feel that expectations from the central HAF funding team go beyond what Ofsted requires. Others pointed to limitations in the data platform, expressing frustration that feedback is not always acted on. Despite this, as with previous years the support available from the central Sandwell HAF team is highly valued, with one provider saying: *"10/10 for ensuring children, young people and families' wider needs are also supported."*

Towards sustainability: organisational growth

During Year 3 providers shared examples of how involvement in the HAF has helped them to grow as organisations, attracting new participants and expanding staffing. 89% of providers agreed that the HAF has created opportunities to access and work with new families, often with many of these children accessing other provision on offer beyond the holiday periods. *"It's had an amazing impact on the kids... they come back day after day after day. And for the second year for some of them... all Easter, all Winter, all Summer."* (Provider)

Marketing and communication around the HAF has seen positive developments, particularly through the use of the HAF website as a marketing platform and a tool for partners to connect and signpost families to local services. One providers acknowledged that *"the marketing done by HAF team has created more awareness"*, helping to increase engagement. However, there were also calls for more inclusive communication methods – such as printed newsletters – for families without access to social media.

Workforce expansion and development has also been a form of organisational growth, increasing numbers and expertise of staff and volunteers. The enthusiasm and sense of purpose among teams has fostered committed individuals within provider organisations who not only deliver high-quality provision, but also grow personally through the experience. *"It's been a real personal journey... they all do it because they love doing it... being there with them when they have these firsts and these special moments."* (Provider)

However, concerns remain about the uncertainty of continued funding, making long-term planning and sustainability a challenge. As with previous years, providers agree that the programme isn't affordable to families without Government investment. As one provider noted, *"Reliance on funding isn't guaranteed – so hard."*

The quality / variety of activities and services is improved

Many providers shared that one way the HAF programme has strengthened their organisations is by enabling them to improve and enhance their offer of a wider range of high-quality, inclusive activities. Opportunities have expanded each year, and collaboration with other organisations has helped providers learn from one another and signpost to other providers' activities.





For many older young people having HAF camps available has been an important time 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.”

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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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.

"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 thank you."

HAF Provider: 4Community Trust @ 4CT The Hub