

Cheshire West & Chester

HAF

Holiday Activities & Food



Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme Annual Report

April 2025 - March 2026



Funded by
UK Government



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Introduction

The holiday activities and food (HAF) programme provides healthy meals, enriching activities, and free childcare places to children from low-income families, benefiting their health, wellbeing and learning.

Following successful pilots between 2018 and 2020, in October 2021, the government announced a 3-year funding settlement of over £200 million each year for the HAF programme nationally. This was extended by a further two years through to 2025-26.

The 2025–2026 programme has continued to evolve, with a strong focus on quality, accessibility, and targeted support. Working with partners, we have strengthened provision, improved engagement, and ensured a high-quality, inclusive offer for children and families. It was agreed by the Department for Education, (DfE), that an additional half-term could be added to the programme and the February 2026 holidays was agreed for Cheshire West and Chester.



1 - Image of residents in Chester

This annual review focuses on the HAF programme in Cheshire West and Chester (CWaC) across the Easter, summer, Winter and February half term holidays in the **2025 - 2026 Financial year**.

HAF enables eligible FSM children and where possible other vulnerable groups to access healthy food and take part in fun activities over the school holiday periods. The programme is funded by the DfE.

We want to thank our partners, local businesses, and schools for supporting HAF 2025/2026, offering a variety of services and support. We are proud to reach and be able to serve so many young people and families in Cheshire West and Chester.

💬 *“A real lifeline – I don’t know what I would do without it.”- Parent*

💬 *“Fantastic club, brilliant staff! We can't wait for the next one!” – Parent*

Aim of the Programme

The programme provides free holiday provision for children and young people, equivalent to at least six weeks per year. This includes a minimum of 16 days during the summer holidays and at least four days during both Easter and Winter, as well as for the first time for this programme using funding for February Half term, which was an extremely popular additional programme for families.

All local authorities have been issued with a framework of standards that all HAF providers are expected to adhere to which can be found on the [Gov.UK website](https://www.gov.uk).

The programme was developed in response to national research identifying school holidays as a particularly challenging time for some families. These periods can create a “holiday experience gap,” where children from low-income households are:

- less likely to take part in organised activities
- more likely to experience poorer nutrition and reduced physical activity
- more likely to feel socially isolated.

There is strong evidence that free holiday clubs can have a positive impact on children and young people, particularly when they:

- offer consistent, accessible and enriching activities
- provide nutritious meals alongside activities
- involve children and families in food preparation and education
- build strong local partnerships, especially with voluntary and community organisations.

The programme supports school-aged children from 4 to 16 years old, and up to 18 years for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While the primary focus is on children eligible for free school meals, up to 15% of funding can be used to support other children and young people who would benefit from the programme and each case is looked at on a case-by-case basis, due to limited funding.

In Cheshire West and Chester, funding for the main holiday periods is delivered through a range of partners to ensure a broad and inclusive offer:

- **Edsential CIC** – commissioned to manage and deliver a large proportion of the programme, working with a diverse network of providers including sports coaches, community organisations and education settings. They play a key role in ensuring an inclusive offer, including managing SEND-specific provision so that children and young people with additional needs can fully participate. Edsential also strengthens the overall quality of delivery through training, guidance and ongoing support for providers.

- **Local Authority Youth Service/Intervention hub/Young People Service** - delivers targeted provision for specific cohorts of young people, including those with additional needs or care experience. These bespoke programmes are shaped by local insight and co-designed where possible, ensuring activities are relevant, engaging and responsive to the needs of each group.
- **Brio Leisure** - delivers a diverse programme of leisure-based activities across the borough, offering inclusive opportunities for children and young people of all ages. Their provision includes SEND-specific programmes for families, helping to ensure accessibility for those with additional needs. In addition, Brio supports schools through the delivery of swimming lessons, promoting physical wellbeing and essential life skills such as water safety.
- **Local Authority Commissioners** - work closely with the HAF programme to provide guidance and support, ensuring the delivery of both face-to-face SEND-specific provision and inclusive universal provision for children and young people with SEND.

A robust commissioning and application process for each holiday period ensures that all provision is high quality, meets local needs, and is appropriate to the time of year.

 *“The young carers have been essential to my daughter. She enjoys every session they do and have helped build her confidence so much” – Parent*

HAF Programme Overview

Free School Meal Eligibility

10,500 children in Cheshire West & Chester schools are currently eligible for benefits-related free school meals (FSM).

In 2025/26, the Cheshire West & Chester HAF programme supported over 7,000 children and families across four programmes. We are proud of the high-quality experiences provided, helping children stay active, eat well, and feel connected during the school holidays.

As more families become eligible for FSM, the importance of support like HAF continues to grow. The programme provides safe and welcoming spaces where children can come together, build friendships, and take part in positive activities. HAF also supports families by:

- encouraging healthy eating habits
- helping children feel included and confident
- connecting families with schools and local support services.

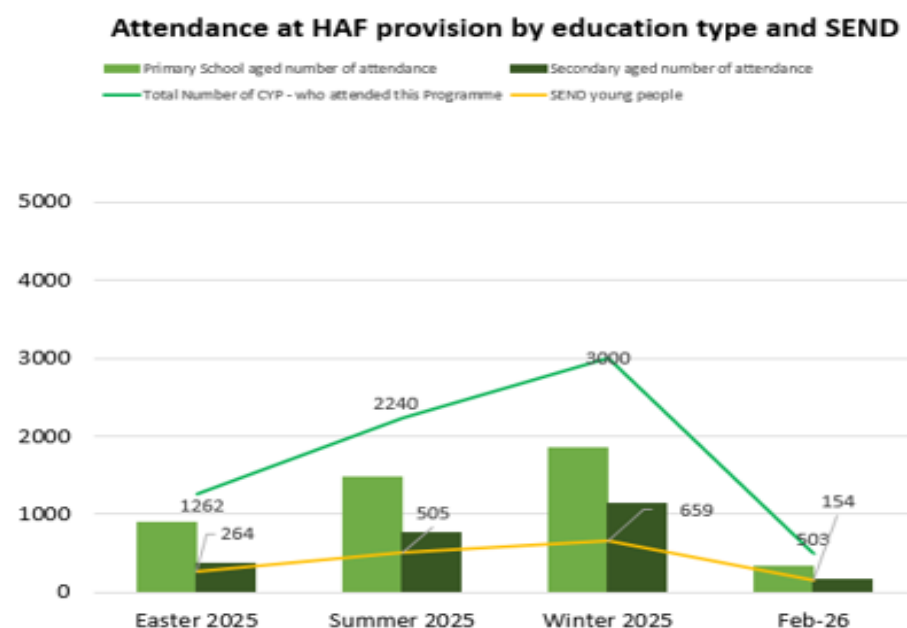
Together, this helps ensure that children not only have fun during the holidays, but also feel supported, safe, and ready to thrive.

Delivery Impact at a Glance!



2 - Poster detailing the delivery impact of HAF 2025/2026

Overall Attendance Trends



3 - Chart highlighting the overall attendance trends

Attendance has steadily increased across each programme:

- Easter 2025: 1262
- Summer 2025: 2240 (+78%)
- Winter 2025: 3000 (+34%)
- February 2026: 503 (shorter programme, expected lower total)

Primary vs Secondary Participation Breakdown:

Programme	Primary	Secondary	% Primary
Easter 2025	894	368	71%
Summer 2025	1,472	768	66%
Winter 2025	1,858	1,142	62%
Feb-26	335	168	67%

Key trends:

- Primary-aged children consistently make up the **majority of attendees**
- However, **secondary participation is gradually increasing**
- From **29%** → **38%** between Easter and Winter, suggesting improving engagement with older young people.

SEND numbers and proportion:

Programme	SEND	Total CYP	% SEND
Easter 2025	264	1262	20.90%
Summer 2025	505	2240	22.50%
Winter 2025	659	3000	22.00%
Feb-26	154	503	30.60%

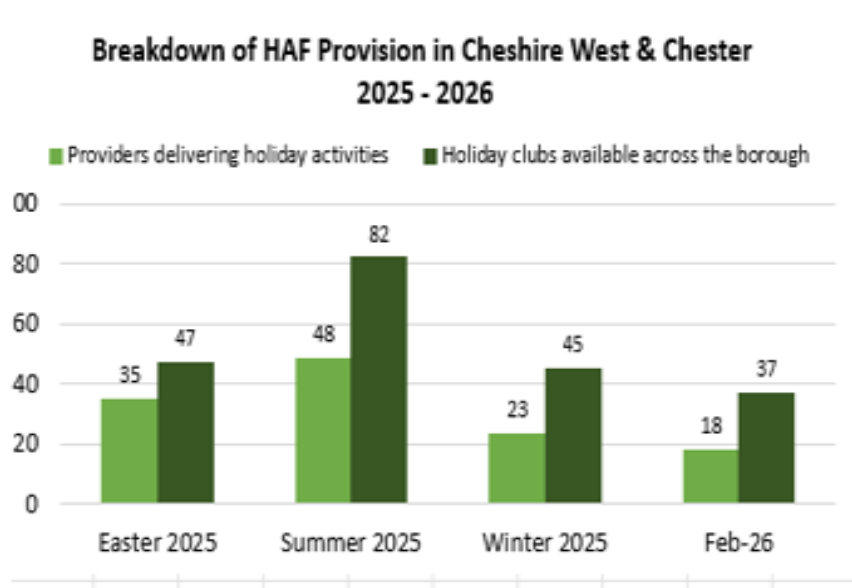
Key Observations & Implications



Strengths

- Strong overall growth in attendance
- Improved engagement with secondary-aged young people
- SEND inclusion consistently embedded (~1 in 5 participants).

HAF Delivery Analysis – Providers & Clubs



4 - Chart highlighting the breakdown of HAF Provision in Cheshire West and Chester 2025-2026

Headline Summary

- Delivery capacity **peaked in Summer 2025** across both providers and holiday clubs
- There is a **notable drop in Winter 2025**, with a further reduction into February 2026
- The pattern reflects **seasonal delivery variation**, with summer offering the broadest provision

Provider Trends

🔍 Key Insights:

- **Strong increase from Easter → Summer (+37%)**
- **Sharp drop from Summer → Winter (-52%)**
- Continued decline into February
- Summer attracts the **highest provider engagement**, likely due to:
 - Longer programme duration
 - Better staffing availability
 - Higher demand from families
- Winter and February programmes may see:
 - Reduced provider capacity
 - Operational challenges (weather, staffing, shorter delivery windows)

Holiday Clubs Availability

🔍 Key Insights:

- Clubs nearly **doubled from Easter → Summer (+74%)**
- Winter drops back to **similar levels as Easter**
- February shows **lowest availability overall**

- Summer provides **maximum geographical and activity coverage**
- Winter returns to a **core level of provision**
- February reflects **targeted or reduced delivery**

Overall, the programme shows strong growth and increasing efficiency, but declining provider numbers and seasonal reductions may impact accessibility and inclusivity, particularly alongside rising demand and SEND need.

💬 “Great coaches. My daughter really enjoyed her CPR training” – Parent

Programme Governance and Delivery

Budget and expenditure

National guidance gives local authorities the flexibility to design HAF provision that meets the needs of local children and families. In Cheshire West and Chester, funding is used to deliver free holiday places with nutritious food, alongside effective coordination of the programme.

This investment supports key outcomes for children and young people, including reducing holiday hunger, improving wellbeing, and increasing access to safe, enriching activities. It also helps ease financial pressure on families during school holidays.

The DfE allows up to 10% of funding to be allocated to programme management, ensuring robust oversight and effective quality assurance. A minimum of 90% of funding is directed towards frontline delivery. In addition, up to 2% may be used for essential equipment to support the delivery of high-quality provision.

Local Authorities also have discretion to allocate up to 15% of funding to provide free or subsidised holiday club places for school-age children, irrespective of background, where there is a clear benefit to participating in the HAF programme. All such awards are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Cheshire West and Chester received **£1,011,600** for 2025/26, enabling a broad range of opportunities for children across the borough to stay active, build skills and remain connected during holiday periods.

A small underspend was identified at year end and declared to the DfE in line with grant conditions. This reflects careful financial management and robust monitoring to ensure funding is used effectively, providers meet expectations, and delivery remains focused on achieving positive outcomes for eligible children and young people.

The table below shows how funding has been allocated, demonstrating a strong focus on impact, quality and value for money.

	Easter	Summer	Winter	Feb – Half Term	Total
Face-to face holiday clubs	£103,212.17	£440,052.14	£83,001.42	£23,561.91	£649,827.64
SEND Specific provisions	£9,924.46	£47,749.36	£11,985.82	£1,438.09	£71,097.73
Remote holiday club provision	--	--	£85,000	--	£85,000
Publicity/Communication	£4,862.90	£8,857.49	£6,056.64	--	£19,777.03
Capital expenditure over £2500	--	--	--	--	--
Management and administration	£27,754	£45,660	£27,746	--	£101,160
Other costs	£10,091	£23,785	£31,241	--	£65,117
Total	£155,844.53	£566,103.99	£245,030.88	£25,000	

All expenditure was closely monitored to ensure full compliance with programme guidance and grant conditions.

“Never been Blackpool, it was sick. The queues were long but it was well worth it”- Young Person

While the local authority did not allocate additional funding to supplement delivery, providers demonstrated a proactive approach to enhancing their offer and extending support to families. This added significant value to the programme and contributed to its overall reach and impact.

This included:

- securing additional funding through successful grant applications and local fundraising
- developing partnerships with local businesses, including supermarkets, to access food donations
- engaging volunteers, creating opportunities that in some cases led to paid employment
- widening access to support additional families who may not have met FSM eligibility criteria but would still benefit

“Sadly for us the price is the main factor, we feel very fortunate that this is available and also that my children love the club and have a brilliant time” – Parent

“The young carers have been essential to my daughter. She enjoys every session they do and have helped build her confidence so much” – Parent

Governance

Strong partnership working across local authority services and delivery partners continues to be fundamental to the success of the HAF programme. These relationships have strengthened over time, supporting effective planning, delivery and continuous improvement.

The programme is supported by a clear governance structure, consisting of a **Partnership Board** and an **Operational Steering Group**.

The **Partnership Board** provides strategic oversight of the programme, including financial monitoring and quality assurance. It receives regular updates from the Operational Steering Group and is responsible for reviewing performance, providing challenge, and making key decisions.

The **Operational Steering Group** oversees the day-to-day management of the programme, including coordination of delivery, performance monitoring and forward planning. It provides a forum to identify emerging issues, share learning, and develop solutions to support ongoing improvement.

The Partnership Board meets following each HAF delivery period, providing an opportunity to review recent programme delivery, assess performance, and agree priorities for upcoming programmes. These meetings also enable partners to reflect on challenges, share successes, and collectively address any issues raised through the Steering Group.

Programme management is based within **Children's Services**, building on the department's strong track record of delivering services for children and young people.

This governance structure ensures strong oversight, effective partnership working and continuous improvement across all aspects of programme delivery.

Memberships will include representatives from:

Partnership Board	Steering group
Local Authority (LA) representatives: ❖ Early Help Head of Service ❖ Senior managers ❖ HAF Programme lead ❖ HAF Project co-ordinator ❖ Public Health ❖ Youth Service ❖ Commissioner SEND ❖ Poverty Truth and Advisory Board (PTAB) ❖ Finance ❖ Insight and intelligence ❖ Wraparound Care Partnership representatives:	LA representatives: ❖ Senior manager ❖ HAF Project co-ordinator ❖ (SEND) Commissioning officer ❖ Youth Service Practice lead ❖ Poverty Truth Officer ❖ Intervention Hub ❖ Wraparound Care Partnership representatives: ❖ Edsential ❖ Brio Leisure ❖ Cheshire West Voluntary Action

❖ Edsential HAF Project manager ❖ Edsential HAF Co-ordinator ❖ Brio Leisure ❖ Parent Carer Forum ❖ Health Integrated Care Board ❖ Cheshire West Voluntary Action	❖ Cheshire West Food Hub (Changing lives Together)
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Partnership Working

Partnership working continues to be a key strength of the HAF programme, enabling us to extend our reach and enhance the support available to children, young people and families.



5 - Give Up Loving Pop (GULP) workbook

The **Public Health Team** has played an important role in developing engaging nutrition resources, supporting children and families to build their understanding of healthy eating and make positive choices. In partnership with Food Active, they created the 'Give Up Loving Pop (GULP)' workbook for HAF, featuring interactive activities for children aged 5-11 to promote healthy hydration and reduce sugary drink consumption.

The team also supported the Winter 'Lets Cook' project, designing recipe cards and working with Cheshire College students to produce supporting videos, helping families to build confidence in preparing healthy meals at home.

Strong relationships with **local businesses and supermarkets** have enabled providers to access food donations, which have been distributed to families. This has helped to extend the impact of the programme beyond face-to-face delivery, providing additional support during the holiday periods.

The council's commissioning team have worked closely with **Parent Carer Forums**, particularly those supporting children and young people with SEND, to inform the development of SEND-specific provision. This has ensured that programmes are shaped by lived experience and are responsive to the needs of families.

Partnerships with food and nutrition organisations, including **Feeding Britain and local food banks**, have further strengthened the programme's ability to support families experiencing food insecurity.

Brio Leisure has continued to be a key delivery partner, not only through its activity programmes but also by supporting wider partnership initiatives and helping to connect families with additional opportunities across the borough.

Close collaboration with members of the steering group has been instrumental, particularly those organisations that work directly with families and have a strong understanding of how best to meet their needs. This includes partners such as **Cheshire Voluntary Action** and the **Poverty Truth Team**, who play a vital role in representing and amplifying the voices of families.

We wanted to share how partnership working brings a project together to effectively support families across the borough.

The Winter 'Lets Cook' food projects demonstrated strong and effective partnership working across the voluntary, community and public sectors, enabling large-scale support to reach families across Cheshire West and Chester.

Working closely with **Changing Lives Together**, the project was delivered following 8 weeks of detailed planning and coordination. The commitment of volunteers was exceptional, with over 900 hours contributed, supported by key individuals whose leadership was instrumental to the project's success.



6 - Image of volunteers helping out with the 'Lets cook' project

Changing Lives Together (CLT) coordinated the sourcing, packing and distribution of over 40 tonnes of food, creating 3,000 recipe boxes containing 24 food items, simple nutritious recipes, and public health information for families.

Through collaboration with schools and local organisations, boxes were delivered to 54 schools over 5 days, supported by businesses and partners who provided venues, transport, food donations and logistical support.

This collective effort not only expanded the reach of the programme year-on-year but also strengthened community connections, with highly positive feedback from volunteers and partners highlighting the value and impact of working together to support local families.

Overall, strong partnership working has enabled the HAF programme to extend its reach, enhance the quality of provision, and provide more holistic support to children, young people and families across Cheshire West and Chester.

We couldn't have done this without...

This project was made possible through the incredible support, time and generosity of partners, volunteers and organisations across the community. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to:

- **Volunteers from across the community**, including residents of Cheshire (particularly Northwich), business volunteers, existing CLT volunteers, and the fantastic teams from Cheshire West and Chester Council (CWaC), whose time and commitment made delivery possible.
- **Sainsbury's Northwich**, and in particular Store Manager *Graham Allen*, for their invaluable support in sourcing and delivering food during the busy Christmas period.
- **Northwich Town Council**, for kindly providing lighting to support the project.
- **Barons Quay**, for generously providing a unit to host the project, and to the Centre Manager, security and cleaning teams for their ongoing support, patience and assistance throughout.
- **Poplars eggs and John Griffiths (Northwich Greengrocers)**, for supplying high-quality fresh fruit and vegetables in the early hours of delivery day, ensuring all boxes were fully prepared before distribution began.
- **Local businesses and organisations**, including CWaC, Colas, INEOS Group and Northwich Town Council, for the loan of vans and drivers to support deliveries.
- **School staff and pupils**, who supported with the unloading of deliveries and played an important role in the smooth distribution process.
- **Our business partners**, including Sainsbury's, Compass Minerals / Deepstore, RMG Group, Colas, Henry Williams & Sons, INEOS / Inovyn, Willis Towers Watson and Monkhouse, whose support across ordering, packing and delivery stages was truly invaluable.

We are incredibly grateful for the overwhelming level of support received. The collaboration, generosity and community spirit demonstrated throughout this project has been essential to its success.

 *"Feedback from parents was that they all enjoyed cooking a meal together and financially helped them". – School*

 *"The parents were delighted to receive their hampers and were impressed with the contents. Thank you to all involved with this initiative". - School*

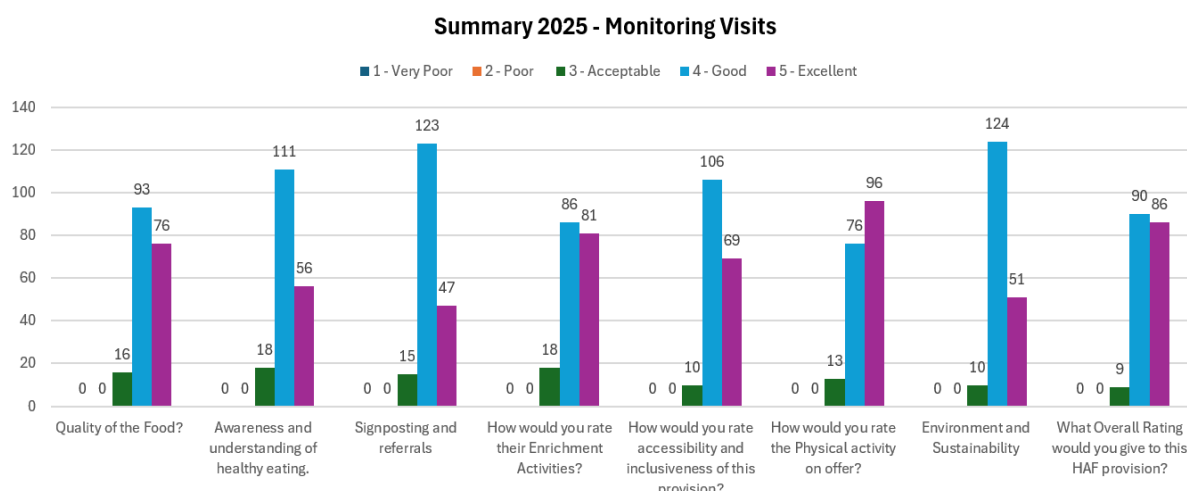
Programme Quality and Provision

Meeting Programme Standards

Ensuring high-quality provision across all HAF programmes remains a key priority. A robust quality assurance framework is in place to ensure that all providers meet DfE HAF programme standards and deliver safe, inclusive and engaging experiences.

Each provider receives at least one quality assurance visit annually, where delivery is observed and assessed against the full range of HAF standards. In addition, Cheshire West and Chester Council, working in partnership with Edsential, carries

out unannounced visits throughout each delivery period to ensure provision is consistently meeting expectations in practice.



7 - Chart highlighting a summary of monitoring visits for 2025

Performance data demonstrates strong outcomes across the programme, with many providers achieving high ratings in key areas, particularly physical activity, accessibility and inclusiveness. Safeguarding remains a central priority, with all providers required to submit policies and procedures as part of the application process. These are reviewed and audited prior to delivery and monitored during programme implementation.

All providers were able to demonstrate that they met at least the required standard across all criteria. Where quality assurance visits took place, providers were given targeted feedback to support continuous improvement and development. Ongoing monitoring, support and challenge will continue to focus on driving further improvements and enabling providers to achieve even higher quality standards in future programme delivery.

Monitoring data shows consistently high-quality provision, with no poor ratings and strong performance across all areas, though there is opportunity to shift more delivery from “good” to “excellent,” particularly in softer engagement areas such as signposting and awareness.

Healthy eating and lifestyles

Promoting healthy eating and positive lifestyle choices is a core element of the HAF programme. The food element has been a key focus this year, with providers supported through training, one-to-one guidance, and provider forums to share best practice. Strong links with local food providers have also been developed, alongside the use of locally designed nutritional workbooks created in partnership with Public Health to support engaging delivery.

All providers are expected to offer a healthy meal for attendees, adapting their provision to suit their facilities while helping children and young people understand the benefits of good nutrition. Providers used a variety of approaches, including

working with catering companies, preparing meals on-site, and using local café settings.

Quality assurance visits identified a wide range of meal options, with a strong emphasis on choice and encouraging children to try new foods. High standards of food safety were consistently observed, in line with school food standards.

Nutritional education formed an important part of programme delivery. Children and young people took part in interactive sessions involving discussions, games and activities based on Public Health guidance. These included exploring sugar content, balanced diets, and practical activities such as smoothie making, preparing dips and creating fruit kebabs.

Providers were encouraged to ensure that every child had access to fruit and/or vegetables each day. Many children tried new foods for the first time, building confidence in a supportive and social environment and developing more positive attitudes towards healthy eating.

A wide variety of meals were offered across the programme, either prepared on-site or sourced through local providers. Dietary requirements, including allergies, were carefully catered for. Where appropriate and in line with guidance, leftover food was offered to families as optional take-home food parcels, extending support beyond the sessions themselves.

Healthy Eating and Lifestyles – Feedback highlights

- Children engaged positively with food and nutrition activities, including cooking and healthy eating sessions
- Parents reported increased awareness of healthy food choices and balanced diets
- Opportunities to take part in food preparation supported the development of practical life skills
- Provision of meals ensured children had access to nutritious food during the holidays
- Activities promoted a broader understanding of healthy lifestyles, including physical activity and wellbeing



8 - Children at an interactive session for healthy eating



9 - Examples of some healthy, nutritious meals provided

“Libby works so hard to get the children involved and getting them outdoors and eating healthily. She asks Parents for food and meal ideas and currently my child loves her make your own wrap (she buys tuna because it’s his favourite) and it makes me Feel like he is valued and cared about” – Parent

“Just wanted to share something which we are incorporated into HAF. I have spent time creating a recipe book. This includes healthy meals, healthier alternatives and provides young people the chance to develop various skills. Each youth provision across the borough will have a copy of it in their centre which can be used during HAF or throughout the year. My young people in Northwich followed one of the recipes last nights and absolutely loved it!!! They are keen to make more of the recipes” - Youth Officer

Enriching Activities

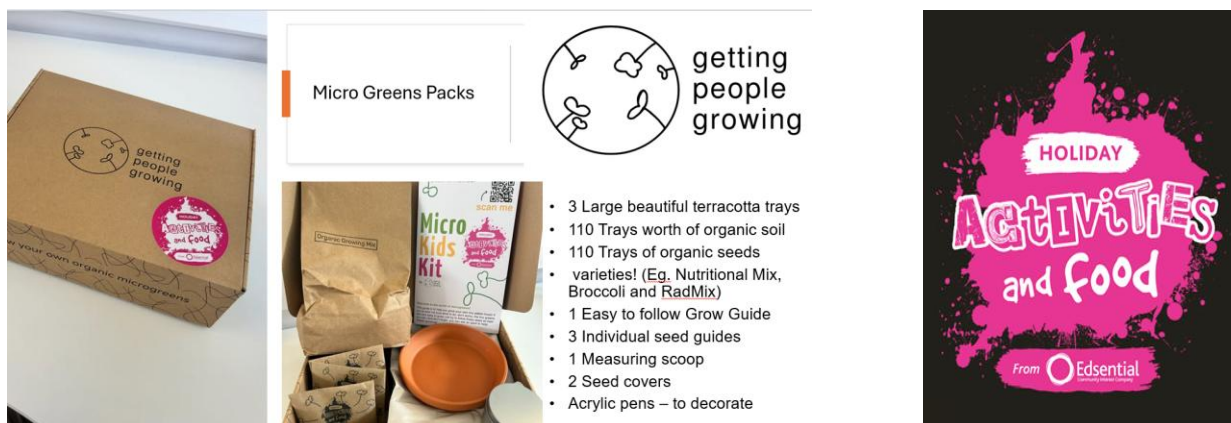
Providing a wide range of enriching activities is a key element of the HAF programme, ensuring children and young people have opportunities to try new experiences, develop skills, and build confidence.

Across the programme, providers offered rich and varied activities designed to support creativity, learning and personal development. Children engaged in a wide range of arts and crafts, including painting, pottery, music, drama and themed creative sessions, alongside opportunities in STEM and digital learning, such as coding, robotics and animation. Many settings incorporated cooking and nutrition-based activities, enabling children to develop practical life skills and an understanding of healthy eating. Additional enrichment included forest school and nature-based experiences, storytelling, gardening and environmental activities, as well as wellbeing sessions such as mindfulness, yoga and sensory play. Opportunities for social interaction, teamwork and confidence-building were embedded throughout, with some providers also offering workshops, performances and trips to further enhance experiences.

A key aim of the programme is for children to leave having experienced new activities and developed skills that they can continue to build on within school, youth provision and at home. These opportunities are particularly valuable for children who may not otherwise have access to such activities.

Let’s Grow – Edsential CiC delivered an engaging project encouraging children and young people to grow their own food while learning about biodiversity, food chains and sustainability. Providers took up the offer and used in their programmes participants received growing packs containing everything needed to plant edible microgreens, which begin to sprout within a week, providing quick results and a healthy snack option. Children could also personalise their pots, enhancing creativity. Families were encouraged to share their progress on social media using #HAF2025 and @EdsentialUK, helping to celebrate and promote the initiative.

“These were used for our summer holiday programme (HAF) and the children loved growing them and tasting them. It was very successful” – Darnhall Primary School



10 - Contents of the Micro Green Packs

The Micro Greens Packs include:

- 3 large terracotta trays
- 110 trays worth of organic social
- 110 trays of organic seeds varieties (E.g. nutritional mix, broccoli and radmix)
- Easy to follow grow guide
- 3 individual seed guides
- 1 measuring scoop
- 2 seed covers
- Acrylic pens to decorate

💬 *“The young people enjoyed decorating the planters the most and whilst doing so it provided an opportunity for us to talk about healthy eating/nutrition – particularly the importance of vegetables and how they all have different benefits” – CWaC Youth Service*

Feedback from both parents and children has been extremely positive, highlighting the quality and variety of activities on offer, as well as the commitment, support and enthusiasm of staff delivering the sessions.

Enrichment Activities – Feedback Highlights

- Children enjoyed a wide variety of creative, educational and enrichment activities.
- Parents noted increased confidence, creativity and willingness to try new experiences.
- Activities supported the development of new skills, including cooking, arts and digital learning.
- Opportunities encouraged independent learning, teamwork and problem-solving.
- A diverse offer ensured there was something for all interests and abilities.

💬 *Liked the DJing and beatboxing, loved using the launchpad and I want to be a DJ now – Young Person*

💬 *“Writing my own song and being able to get it performed and recorded” - Young Person*

💬 *“My child really loved the Chester hospital forest club, he met some lovely people and did new activities, my child asked everyday if he could go again.” – Parent*

Physical Activities

Encouraging children and young people to be active and develop physical skills is a key priority of the HAF programme. Providers delivered a wide range of physical activities designed to promote movement, build confidence, and support overall wellbeing.

Providers delivered a wide-ranging programme of physical education and activity, offering children opportunities to take part in diverse sports such as football, basketball, cricket, dodgeball, gymnastics, archery and swimming. Multi-sports sessions were a key feature, ensuring activities were inclusive and accessible for all ages and abilities, alongside structured coaching to develop skills, confidence and teamwork. Outdoor and adventure-based activities, including climbing, forest school, biking, orienteering and team challenges, further encouraged active play, resilience and exploration. Many providers also incorporated fitness-based games, dance, and themed activity days, keeping sessions engaging and varied.

Physical Activity – Feedback Highlights

- Children reported being more physically active, with increased participation in a wide range of sports and activities.
- Parents highlighted improvements in fitness, energy levels and enthusiasm for activity.
- Activities were described as engaging, inclusive and accessible to all abilities.
- Opportunities to try new sports supported skill development and confidence.
- Families valued access to activities that may not otherwise be available.

Overall, the physical offer promoted active lifestyles, skill development and enjoyment of sport in a fun and supportive environment.

💬 *“Smoothie bike was mad and they actually tasted good”. – Young person*

💬 *“My child thoroughly enjoys the HAF sessions at Climbing Hut as they are kind, welcoming and accepting of his needs and differences. I always know that when I leave him there, he is in a safe and happy environment that goes above and beyond to support and make sure he has the best time”. – Parent*



11 - Image of the 'Smoothie bike'

Social Wellbeing and Inclusion

Supporting social wellbeing and reducing isolation is a key aim of HAF. The provision creates safe, welcoming environments where children and young people can build friendships, develop social skills, and feel a sense of belonging.

“A is a regular at our Active Camps and usually struggles at sign in to come in independently (often needing time with mum and plenty of reassurance). This time round she came in with a huge smile on her face and felt really confident - applying this positive attitude to all of the activities throughout the day” Provider.

For many children, particularly those from low-income families or with additional needs, school holidays can be a time of increased isolation. HAF helps to address this by providing opportunities to connect with peers, take part in group activities, and engage in positive shared experiences.

Providers prioritised social wellbeing and inclusion, creating safe and welcoming environments where all children felt able to participate and thrive. Activities were designed to strengthen communication, teamwork and positive relationships, supporting children to build friendships and develop confidence. Inclusive practice ensured that provision was accessible to children of all abilities, including those with SEND and targeted groups such as young carers, with tailored support enabling meaningful engagement. A range of wellbeing-focused activities, including mindfulness, sensory play and group discussions, supported improved emotional awareness and resilience. Shared experiences, such as group meals and collaborative activities, fostered a strong sense of belonging and community, resulting in positive impacts on children’s confidence, social skills and overall wellbeing.

Parents and carers also reported benefits, noting improvements in their children’s confidence, mood and willingness to engage with others. The programme also provided reassurance to families, knowing their children were in a safe and supportive environment during the holidays.

Social Wellbeing and Inclusion – Feedback Highlights

- Children reported feeling more connected and engaged, with increased opportunities to build friendships.
- Parents highlighted improved confidence and social skills, particularly for quieter or more anxious children.
- Inclusive environments supported participation for children of all abilities, including SEND and targeted groups.
- Activities encouraged teamwork, communication and a sense of belonging.
- Families valued the opportunity for children to socialise in a safe and supportive setting.

“It really helped build my child’s confidence and social skills.” – Parent

“My child really loved the Chester hospital forest club, he met some lovely people and did new activities, my child asked everyday if he could go again.” – Parent

- 💬 *“Great variety of activities and my child always come home happy.” – Parent*
- 💬 *“My child came home happy every day and made new friends.” – Parent*

Engagement and Support

Marketing and Communication

Effective communication and marketing are essential to raising awareness of the HAF programme, encouraging participation, and attracting new providers to deliver provision across the borough.

This year, a multi-channel approach was used to promote the programme and engage key audiences. This included:

- a central Council and Edsential webpage.
- social media activity across Council and Edsential platforms (including Facebook and X).
- targeted communications to key stakeholders.
- headteacher meetings and briefings.
- elected member briefings.
- school newsletters.
- cost of living bulletins.
- press releases.

Working closely with Edsential CIC, promotion of the programme begins at the application stage and continues through to delivery. Potential providers are supported to apply for funding, for individual holiday periods. Information sessions are also offered to support new and existing providers, helping to build capacity and ensure a strong pipeline of delivery partners.

Providers are encouraged to use key branding, including DfE, Cheshire West, HAF and Edsential logos, and to include shared hashtags (such as #HAF2025) to maximise reach and visibility.

Feedback Highlights – Communications Impact

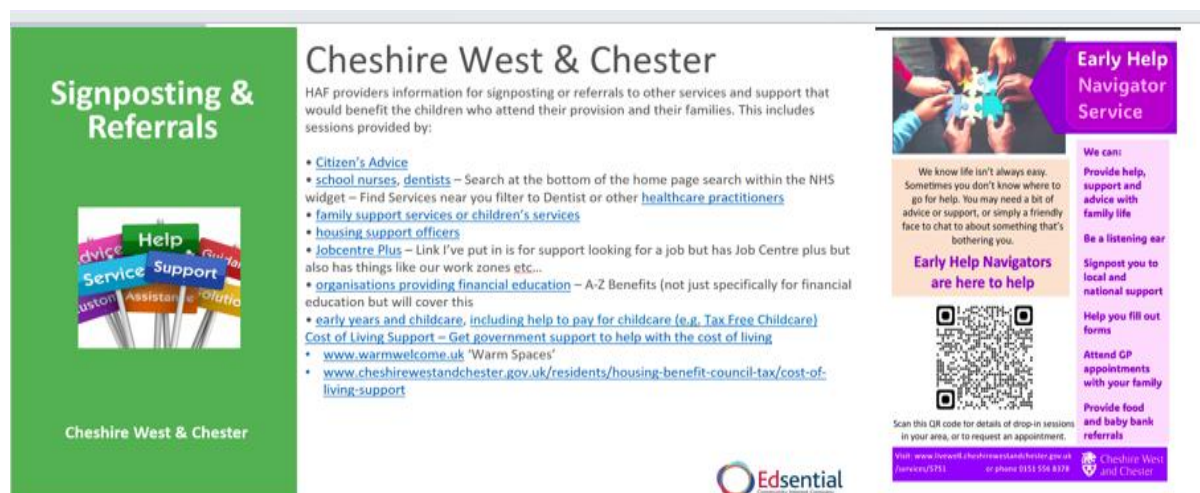
- Increased awareness of the HAF programme among families and partners.
- Strengthened engagement with providers and stakeholders.
- Improved reach, enabling more children and families to access opportunities.

Supporting Families Beyond Provision

Supporting families is a core element of HAF. Provision extends beyond activities, ensuring families are connected to wider sources of support that improve wellbeing and reduce barriers to participation.

Providers play a vital role in identifying and responding to the needs of children and families. Through regular engagement, they build trusted relationships that enable informal support and timely signposting to relevant services. This helps families access the right support earlier and with greater confidence.

All HAF providers receive mandatory training from Edsential, which includes guidance on effective signposting and referral pathways. This ensures staff have up-to-date knowledge of local services and are confident in offering appropriate support. Safeguarding training further strengthens this approach by supporting providers to recognise and respond to emerging needs.



12 - Example of signposting and referral information leaflet provided to Edsential

Providers are equipped with practical resources, including a local authority information leaflet highlighting key services available during school holidays. This includes:

- food banks and community food provision.
- cost of living support.
- health and wellbeing services.
- wider community and voluntary sector support.

A strong emphasis has been placed on proactive signposting, with providers linking families to:

- food support, including food banks and community organisations.
- health and wellbeing services.
- early help and family support.
- housing, financial and cost of living support.
- voluntary and community sector organisations.

In many cases, the trusted relationships developed through HAF provision have enabled earlier identification of need and more meaningful conversations with families. This has reduced barriers to accessing support and increased confidence in seeking help.

A provider Portal has been set up through Edsential which will further strengthen our structured communication tools, including training materials and presentation resources, ensuring consistent messaging and clear referral pathways across all providers.

More information about HAF can be found on:

- [Live Well Website](#)
- [Cheshire West and Chester website](#)

Other areas of the Cheshire West and Chester website that provide information include:

- [Benefits and Welfare Support](#)
- [Family Hubs](#)
- [Best Start in Life Website](#)
- [SEND local offer](#)

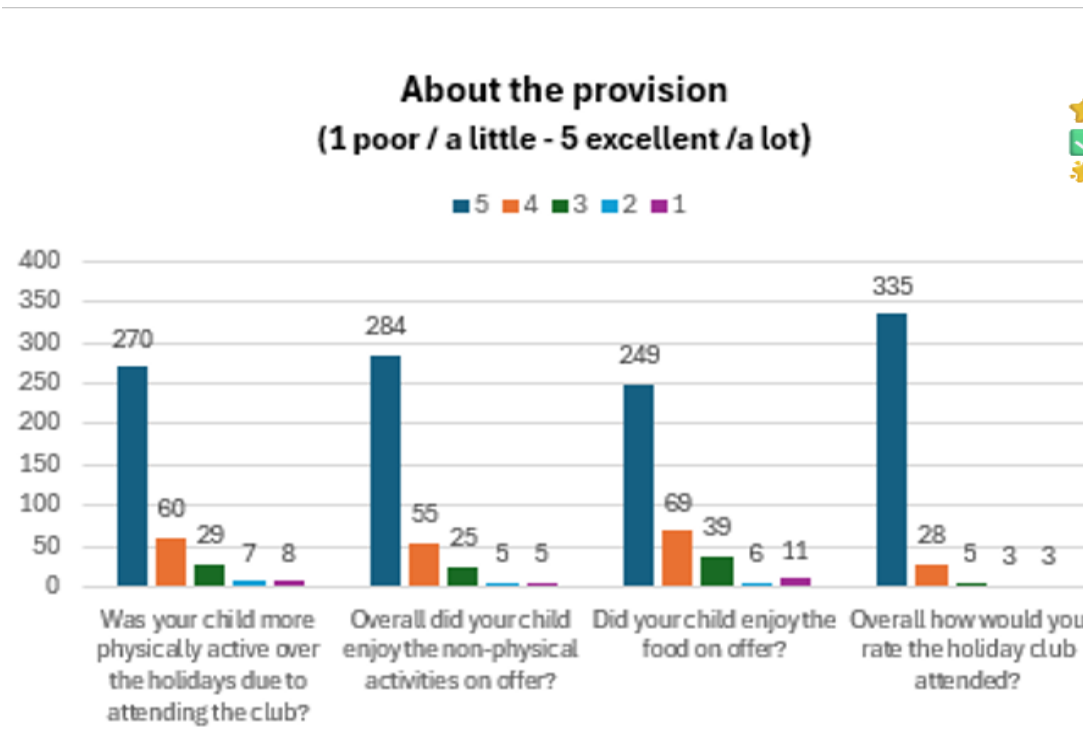
Overall, HAF has played a key role in strengthening support for families, not only through direct provision for children and young people, but by connecting families to wider services and community networks that support longer-term wellbeing.

HAF 2025 – 26: Key Insights and Learning

Feedback from Parent/Carers

To support continuous improvement and ensure the HAF programme continues to meet the needs of children and families, parents and carers are encouraged to complete a feedback survey following participation. This feedback provides valuable insight into what is working well and where further development is needed, enabling us to shape and refine provision, celebrate successes and respond to emerging needs. It also underpins our “You Said, We Listened” approach, clearly demonstrating how the views and experiences of families directly inform programme development and future planning. By actively listening and responding to feedback, we can strengthen delivery, enhance quality and ensure the programme continues to have a meaningful and positive impact on children and young people.

Key outcomes from the survey.



13 - Chart highlighting survey responses about the HAF programme

Findings are based on 274 survey responses, with percentages reflecting combined positive ratings (4–5) across each of the question above.

Overall Experience

- ✓ 97% of families gave a positive rating
- 🌟 90% rated the programme as excellent

🏃 Physical Activity

- ✓ 88% of children were more physically active
- 🌟 72% rated this as excellent

🎨 Activities & Engagement

- ✓ 91% of children enjoyed enrichment activities
- 🌟 76% rated these as excellent

🍎 Food & Nutrition

- ✓ 85% of children enjoyed the food provided
- 🌟 67% rated this as excellent

- 💬 “A fantastic programme – a real lifeline for our family.”- Parent
- 💬 “It has really helped build my child’s confidence.” – Parent

You Said	We Listened (Our Response)
Limited places available and high demand “Limited places available... unable to book more days”	We are exploring ways to increase capacity and expand delivery, working with providers to offer more places where possible in line with funding requirements. We are also encouraging providers to open more paid places in addition to their existing HAF provision to increase opportunities.
Session times do not always suit working families “Would prefer longer hours (e.g. 9–3 or 9–5)” “Early finish times made childcare difficult”	We are reviewing delivery models and encouraging providers to offer longer and more flexible sessions where feasible and to look at offering paid places
Programmes are too short or not spread across holidays “Wish it ran longer / more days across holidays”	We are working towards extending provision across more weeks and increasing session availability. This has to be in line with HAF Programme guidelines and funding requirements, but we are having conversations with providers to look at options connected to wraparound childcare and other holidays such as February half-term.
Access is limited for some families “Should be available to more families / working parents” “Not inclusive enough for all children (e.g. siblings, SEN availability)”	We are continuing to explore ways to widen access and improve inclusivity, where funding allows alongside Department for Education requirements set out in guidance.
Gaps in SEND provision in some areas “There is a gap in provision for children with additional needs”	We are prioritising the development of more inclusive and specialist SEND provision across the programme with universal and specialist providers.
Communication and awareness could be improved “Needs more advertising – some families weren’t aware”	We are strengthening our communications approach with schools, partners and families across the local authority to ensure wider awareness, initiating communication earlier and through additional communication channels.

2025 Programme Highlights and Key Developments

The 2025 programme has provided valuable insight into what is working well and where the programme continues to evolve:



Introduction of the EEQU booking system

The introduction of the online booking system in partnership with EEQU for the first time, in line with DfE expectations. This was fully operational ahead of schedule and has proven to be extremely successful and well received by partners as their

understanding of the requirements of the system grew. Initial concerns at greater asks reduced the number of providers for Easter and summer delivery but these concerns have proven to be unfounded.

Improved Data Accuracy and Reporting

The EEQU system has also ensured we are now able to report on unique individuals accessing each programme more accurately than under the previous manual system giving more accurate data on eligible children and young people and each is only counted once no matter how many times they attend potentially multiple provisions.

Strong engagement from primary-aged children

We continue to see higher attendance from primary-aged children compared to secondary-aged young people. This reflects both sustained demand for childcare and a greater willingness among younger children to engage in structured holiday provision. However, participation among secondary-aged young people is gradually increasing, rising from 29% to 38% between Easter and Winter.

Growth in providers and community involvement

There has been an increase in new providers and community groups delivering HAF programmes, strengthening the local offer for families. Provider forums and one-to-one support from Edsential continue to play a key role in sharing good practice, addressing challenges, and building capacity across the sector.

Expanded training and workforce development

A comprehensive training offer continues to be delivered by Edsential, with providers required to attend mandatory sessions to support effective programme delivery. This includes a range of face-to-face training opportunities, such as Sensory Processing, ASC, ADHD and Understanding Behaviour, Grant Funding Skills, and Understanding Behaviour in Neurodiverse Children and Young People. In addition, a full-day immersive SEND training course was planned for the summer, alongside a suite of online training options including Basic Paediatric First Aid, Food Allergy Awareness, Level 2 Food Hygiene, and Level 2 Safeguarding Children.

This programme of training supports workforce development and helps ensure consistent quality and inclusive practice across HAF provision. Local Authority training courses are also available, including those offered by the Tackling Poverty Team and Cheshire Voluntary Action, who welcome HAF providers to attend in order to strengthen support and guidance for families.

Recognising and celebrating success

In January 2026, a celebration event was arranged and delivered by Edsential to recognise the commitment, passion and achievements of providers delivering HAF programmes during 2025. The event also welcomed representatives from the DfE and EEQU, providing a valuable and engaging networking opportunity for all attendees. The event was exceptionally well organised and highly regarded, clearly demonstrating the quality, professionalism and dedication of Edsential in delivering a meaningful and impactful experience.

Strengthening SEND inclusion

A strong focus on SEND inclusion has enabled more children and young people to access provision. Through training, support and shared learning, providers have been encouraged to make small but meaningful adaptations to improve accessibility. This has been supported through equality and experiential SEND training, alongside inclusive communication and promotion.

Continued focus on healthy eating

Providers were supported through access to training on food and nutrition, delivered by Food Active, alongside a range of additional resources. LA Public Health Leads food workbook has continued to support engaging and practical healthy eating education for children and families. In addition, the *Let's Cook* winter project, which promotes healthy recipes, proved successful once again this year.

Strengthening partnerships and early help

Closer working with Children's Centres, DWP and the local authority's Early Help Navigator service has strengthened support for families. Navigators have supported providers and attended sessions, helping to signpost families, offer guidance and connect them to local services.

Targeted support for vulnerable children

Funding has supported children moving towards permanence plans, including those foster and kinship care. Enhanced provision has included group work and a two-day residential, supporting confidence, self-esteem and family relationships, alongside targeted work with parents and carers.

2026 Priorities - Looking Ahead:

We are delighted that the Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed continued funding for the HAF programme for a further three years. This provides a valuable opportunity to build on the success of previous delivery and further strengthen the programme's impact across Cheshire West and Chester.

Our ambition remains clear: to ensure that every child and young person who attends HAF benefits from positive, enriching experiences—creating lasting memories of their school holidays while supporting their health, wellbeing and development. We are committed to making a meaningful difference to the lives of children and families across the borough.

Key Development Areas

Following programme monitoring and evaluation, several priority areas have been identified to support continuous improvement:

- Supporting providers to progress from **“Good” to “Excellent”**, with steering group members working collaboratively to identify gaps and deliver targeted training

- Strengthening **signposting and referral pathways**
- Enhancing **healthy eating awareness** across provision
- Embedding **environmental sustainability**
- Improving **consistency of accessibility** across all settings

Using Data to Drive Improvement

With the introduction of our new booking system, we now have access to richer programme data. We will continue to analyse this to:

- Identify gaps in provision
- Understand attendance trends across different programmes
- Inform targeted actions to increase participation
- Support more effective and responsive programme planning
- Create joint programmes to support more families

Wraparound Care

We will continue to support the development of sufficient school-age childcare that is **accessible, affordable, high-quality and inclusive**. This includes building on:

- The national wraparound childcare programme
- New free breakfast club initiatives
- Existing HAF provision delivered alongside paid-for childcare

SEND-Specific Provision

Expanding SEND provision remains a key priority. We will:

- Increase the breadth of providers delivering tailored programmes for different age groups
- Strengthen partnerships with Parent Carer Forums, SEND commissioners and specialist schools
- Provide ongoing training and support to improve inclusion within mainstream provision
- Enable more children and young people with SEND to participate, with appropriate adjustments and, where possible, 1:1 support.

Engaging Families and Listening to Feedback

We will continue to place parent and carer feedback at the heart of programme development by:

- Analysing feedback to identify areas for improvement
- Working with providers and partnership boards to address concerns

- Sharing positive feedback and recognising success
- Updating on changes “You Said / We Listened.

Increasing Participation and Reach

Participation in HAF continues to grow, particularly among secondary-aged young people. We will build on this by:

- Delivering a more tailored approach for both primary and secondary cohorts
- Continuing to prioritise inclusion, particularly for children with SEND
- Expanding outreach to ensure more families can access the programme.

Maintaining Quality and Building on Success

We remain committed to delivering a high-quality programme that builds on previous success. Our focus will be to:

- Increase participation while maintaining high standards
- Use feedback from families, providers and partners to shape delivery
- Ensure all provision remains engaging, enriching and impactful

Strengthening Partnerships and Community Links

Strong partnership working will continue to underpin programme delivery. We will:

- Increase the visibility of HAF across local networks
- Strengthen community partnerships
- Improve communication to ensure more families are aware of available opportunities.

Supporting the Whole Family

We will take a more holistic, family-focused approach by:

- Enhancing signposting, information, advice and guidance
- Strengthening links with Children’s Centres and the 0–19 Starting Well service
- Supporting more joined-up working across services.

Promoting Sustainability and New Experiences

We are committed to encouraging children and young people to engage with environmental sustainability. Initiatives such as the “**Let’s Grow**” project will:

- Provide opportunities to grow food using simple kits
- Increase awareness of biodiversity and food sources

- Promote healthy eating in a fun and accessible way.

Targeted Support for Vulnerable Young People

We will continue to enhance provision for vulnerable groups,

This will include targeted group work and residential opportunities focused on building:

- Confidence
- Resilience
- Positive relationships.

Strengthening Systems and Innovation

The introduction of the **EEQU online booking system** will:

- Improve accessibility for families
- Streamline programme management
- Strengthen reporting and data use
- Support delivery partners more effectively.

There is also potential for the system to support wider services across the local authority over time.

Looking Ahead

We have a great deal to feel optimistic about. Through continued partnership working, innovation, and a strong focus on quality and inclusion, we look forward to further developing the HAF programme and extending its positive impact across the borough.

Further Information

If you have any questions about the HAF programme, please contact:

 HAF@Cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

Follow our social media channels to stay up to date with the latest HAF opportunities and activities.



We extend our sincere thanks to all providers and partners in particular venues, such as schools, who have enabled access to buildings and grounds to support programme delivery and contributed to the success of the 2025/26 programme. We are particularly appreciative of lead partners, including Edsential CIC, Local Authority services, Brio, and Changing Lives Together. Through your strong partnership, dedication, and shared commitment, you have played a vital role in maximising the programme's impact and delivering meaningful opportunities for children and young people.

We are very grateful for the contributions of the following providers:

Activity for All Chester
 Amber Button Community CIC
 Avenue Services – Blacon Adventure Playground
 AW Coaching
 Blacon High School
 CA Alternative Futures
 CEPD
 Cheshire Young Carers
 Chester City Baths
 Chester Zoo
 Climbing Hut Ellesmere Port
 Cloughwood Academy (SEND only)
 Darnhall Primary School
 Dee Point Primary School
 Dunkys Day Nurseries Ltd
 Edsential (SEND only)
 Ellesmere Port Catholic High School
 Full of Beans at Rossmore Primary School
 GOALS Chester
 Grosvenor Hart Homes – Grosvenor Hart Hub
 Grow-Wellbeing CIC – Holiday

Adventure Club
 Heswall Disabled Children's Holiday Fund
 Jam Coding – Chester
 Kixx Chester
 Majestic Academy of Performing Arts
 Multiflex School Sports
 Northwich Multi-Sports Camp
 Over Hall Community School
 Overleigh St Mary's CE Primary School
 Pantry for Blacon (Blacon Beacon)
 Peninsula Football Coaching Ltd
 ProCoaching
 Progressive Sports
 Purple Gecko Community CIC
 S4YC
 Save the Family
 Sean Bailey Wellness CIC
 SG Sports
 Sportibeas
 Sports Coaching Group
 St Winefride's Primary School
 Storyhouse

Superstars Holiday Club Limited
 Tenpin Bowling – Cheshire Oaks/Chester
 The Acorns Primary & Nursery School
 The Arches Primary School
 The County High School Leftwich
 The People's Pantry
 Tree House @ Kingsley Community Primary & Nursery School
 Vara Sports and Education
 Vivify Community Dance & Sport CIC
 Westminster Community Primary School

