

HOLIDAY AND ACTIVITY FOOD REPORT 2025-2026



Dorset
Council

HAF Annual Report 2025/2026

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1. Overview

The [Holiday Activities and Food \(HAF\) Programme](#) is a government programme that aims to provide healthy food and enriching activities to children and young people aged 5 to 16 who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. HAF is funded by the Department for Education. The programme has provided healthy food and enriching activities to eligible children since 2018 and has ensured that during the school holidays more children in Dorset have:

- eaten healthily
- been active
- taken part in engaging and enriching activities
- been safe and less socially isolated
- developed a greater knowledge of health and nutrition
- been more engaged with school

The programme includes the delivery of enriching activities and nutritious food during the Easter, Summer, and Christmas school holidays.

In Dorset during 2025/2026 this has meant:

- ✓ 73 providers delivered a variety of activities including sports, cultural, forest school/outdoor education and food nutrition across Dorset
- ✓ Approx 6000 places were taken up by children with SEND
- ✓ Just under 1900 eligible children took part in Summer 2025
- ✓ Over 20,000 hot nutritious meals were served across the year
- ✓ Activities took place across Dorset in all the towns and 17 village locations

HAF provision plays an important role in supporting families beyond the school term, offering accessible holiday activities that reduce isolation, support working parents and promote children's wellbeing. Through closer links with Family Hubs, we are strengthening pathways for families to access wider early help support, including parenting, health and community services. This integrated approach ensures that HAF is not a standalone programme, but a key component of a joined-up "Best Start in Life" system, contributing to improved outcomes for children and families across Dorset.

2. Funding

In the 2025/26 financial year, Dorset Council received £932,930 from the Department for Education (DfE) to support the HAF programme. Additionally, the Council secured:

Ukraine Response Tariff grant	£10,000
Household Support Fund	£11,000

To further address the Cost-of-Living crisis, the Council also allocated £30,000 from its reserves.

£69,224 (7.4%) was spent on administration costs. This funded 1 part time Programme Co-ordinator and 1 part-time Business Support Officer.

This investment enabled the delivery of a wide-ranging, countywide programme, reaching thousands of children and families, supporting 73 providers, and providing over 20,000 nutritious meals alongside enriching activities. The relatively low administration cost represents strong value for money, ensuring that the majority of funding is directed towards frontline provision and direct support for children and young people

3. Provisions

We worked with the following organisations and partners to deliver the Dorset HAF programme in 2025/2026.

360 Degree Sports	MW Tennis Services
3d Health and Fitness	National Trust - Kingston Lacy
Activate management	Outdoor Ed
Activate performing arts	PESSPA
AFC Bournemouth	Poole Forest School
AJM Sports Coaching	Pottery Corner
Andrew Simpson	Premier Education
Artz+	Primary Sports and Education Bridport
Bridport Leisure Centre	Primary Sports South Somerset
Buckland Newton Family Hub	Prime Time Kids Club
Champion Skill Schools	ProCoaching
Chapelhay Community Playgarden Association	PYCF
Cumulus Outdoors	Ripple Rebels
Diverse City	Rising Stars
Dorchester Arts	Riversmeet
Dorchester Town Council	Sandmartins Activity Club
Dorchester Town FC	Sandy Hill Arts
Dorchester Youth Centre	SEND Nurture Network
Dorset Music Service	Shining Stars
Dorset Wild Ones	St Nicholas Church
Dorset Youth	Stars Holiday club
DTCA Group	Streetlight Project
Educamps	Supastrikers
Explorers	Swanage Town FC
Flowerdew Farm	TCW Sports
Friendly Food Club	The Bank of Dreams and Nightmares
Globefit	The Official Test Centre
Happy Healthy Kidz	The Reptile Academy
Houseworks	The Talk About Trust
JA Teaching and Coaching	The Vale Pantry
Laserguys	Total Sports
Leeson House	Treads
Let's Get Loud	Waterside Weymouth Comm Forum
Library services	Weymouth and Portland Adventure
LYD Sports	Weymouth Outdoor Education Centre
Mini ballers	Wonderland Day Nursery
Museum of East Dorset	

4. Statistics and trends

There was a slight decrease in the number of children recorded as attending the programme during summer and winter.

The larger numbers during the winter period in 2024 can be attributed to a well-attended family fun day held at Farmer Palmers in Wareham, which drew over 200 children to the event. We also did not repeat the February Half term activities mostly due to budget constraints and continuity of provision during the other half terms

The number of eligible children reached in each holiday period:

2024-2025

Holiday period	Primary-age HAF funded	Secondary-age HAF funded	Total HAF funded
Easter 2024	760	266	1026
Summer 2024	1356	553	1909
Winter 2024	928	212	1140
Feb 2025 (new)	476	107	583

2025-2026

Holiday period	Primary-age HAF funded	Secondary-age HAF funded	Total HAF funded
Easter 2025	848	222	1070
Summer 2025	1568	291	1859
Winter 2025	680	205	885

There is a significantly higher number of primary aged children accessing the programme compared to secondary aged. This is largely due to the need for childcare for the younger aged cohort and their willingness to attend holiday club type activity. Engaging with the teenage eligible young people remains a challenge.

The proportion of primary age and secondary age children who have participated in the programme:

2024- 2025

Period	Primary-age HAF funded	Secondary-age HAF funded
Easter 2024	74%	26%
Summer 2024	71%	29%
Winter 2024	81%	19%

2025- 2026

Period	Primary-age HAF funded	Secondary-age HAF funded
Easter 2025	79%	21%
Summer 2025	84%	16%
Winter 2025	77%	23%

There is a considerable proportion of children with special educational needs and disabilities who are also eligible for free school meals. It is essential that we continue to ensure providers are inclusive in their approach and support them to do this through access to additional funding and training opportunities.

The number of children with additional needs and, or a disability who have participated in the programme:

Period	HAF-funded with SEND
Easter 2024	36%
Summer 2024	35%
Winter 2024	37%
Feb 2025 (new)	33%

Period	HAF-funded with SEND
Easter 2025	30%
Summer 2025	29%
Winter 2025	32%

The programme is maintaining its numbers and, in some instances, the number of sessions attended each holiday period is increasing. Feedback from families suggest that the participants enjoy their time at the provision and return attendances are good.

Total number of sessions attended:

2024-2025

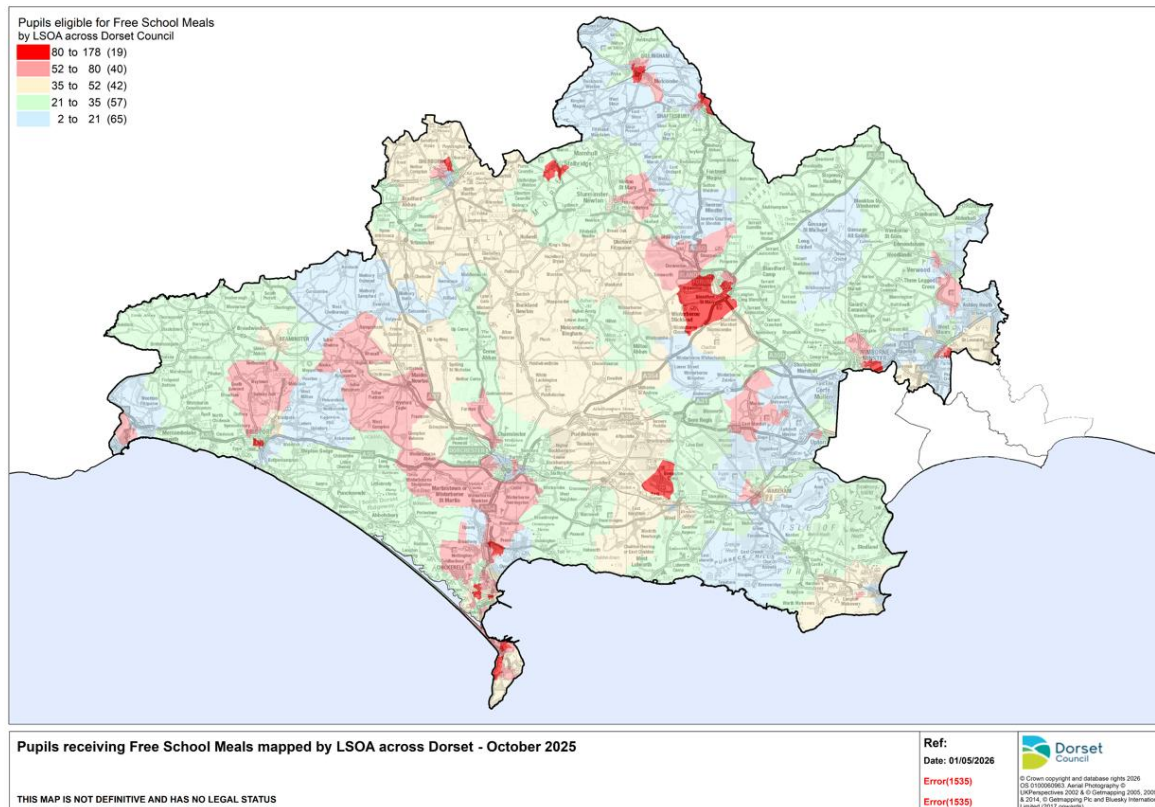
Period	Primary sessions attended	Secondary sessions attended	No of sessions / meals served
Easter 2024	3896	1142	5038
Summer 2024	11555	3455	15010
Winter 2024	3308	815	4123
Feb 2024	1551	293	1866
Total	20310	5705	26037

2025-2026

Period	Primary sessions attended	Secondary sessions attended	No of sessions / meals served
Easter 2025	4696	480	5688
Summer 2025	10625	2012	12637
Winter 2025	1685	480	5688
Total	17006	2972	24013

5. Demographics

In October 2025, according to the most recent census, Dorset had 9314 children eligible for free school meals, a slight decrease from the previous year. The map below shows the geographical area where the greatest number of children eligible for benefit related free school meals live.



*Taken from October 2025 Census

Areas where there is a high number of children eligible for benefit related free school meals include:

- Littlemoor West
- Fortuneswell North
- Littlemoor East
- Westham North Westhaven
- Ferndown Tricketts Cross East
- The Maltings (Shaftesbury)
- Wimborne Leigh Park
- Westham West St Augustines
- Gillingham Town
- Shaftesbury Grosvenor

6. Our inclusive offer

Over 37% of Dorset children who are eligible for Free School Meals also have a special educational need or disability (SEND). This is consistent with data recorded in 2024–2025 and reflects the increasing complexity of need seen nationally.

In line with national SEND reform priorities, the HAF programme plays an important role in supporting a more inclusive, confident and responsive system. Our approach focuses not only on meeting immediate need, but on building the capacity of providers to support children and young people effectively within mainstream settings.

To achieve this, we continue to invest in workforce development and inclusive practice by offering free training and ringfenced funding, enabling providers to employ additional staff and make reasonable adjustments based on individual need. This supports a more consistent and sustainable model of inclusion across the provider network.

We also work in partnership with specialist Short Breaks providers to deliver targeted activities for children with more complex needs, ensuring that all children are able to access enriching experiences during the holiday period.

Through this approach, HAF contributes to early help and prevention by:

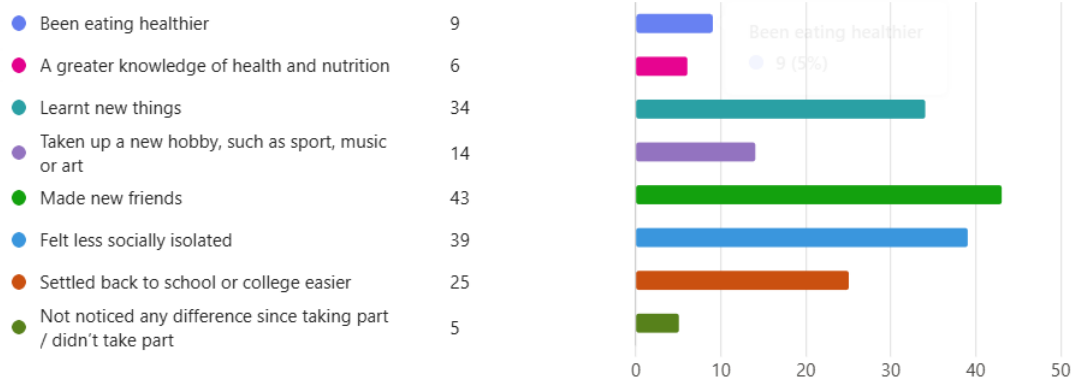
- supporting children to access activities alongside their peers
- building confidence and skills in mainstream provision
- reducing the need for more specialist intervention over time

This ensures that HAF is not only inclusive in delivery but actively contributes to Dorset's wider ambition to improve outcomes for children with SEND as part of a joined-up Best Start in Life system.

7. Feedback from children and parents

We conducted a customer experience survey after the summer holidays on the benefits of the HAF programme to the families that took part. From the parents' perspective they reported that:

Outcomes for children



- 57 % of parents said that their children felt less socially isolated over the summer holidays, this was an increase from 55% in 2024/2025
- The most significant outcome was that children had made new friends (63%)
- 37% of parents/ carers felt that their children settled back to school or college easier because of the HAF programme

Changing children's lifestyle choices when it comes to eating healthier remains a challenge. We will continue to work with partners such as the Friendly Food Club to help us improve on this outcome.

8. Quotes from parents/ carers

- *This is such a helpful scheme, it allowed my daughter to have a more settled transition back to school still see her friends and remain in a routine that allowed her to be more grounded and relaxed over the summer*
- *This changed our lives. I can't afford to take my children out during the holidays, they had one of the best summers this year because of the incredible variety of activities. I was so impressed with the meals provided too and really enjoyed being able to go with my children to their activities as well as a few options of leaving them so I could have a break.*
- *Provision for primary age school children is excellent, however specialised sessions specifically advertised for secondary age could be improved. Especially opportunities to participate in outdoor adventure activities if possible. I believe that there may be a great number of teenagers who would benefit from appropriately aged activities during the holidays especially as many youth centres and programmes have closed in recent years. However, my compliments to all involved in the HAF programme. Such a brilliant thing for Dorset's young people.*
- *My children have loved the summer in Dorset activities. They get to try out new hobbies and sports that they wouldn't usually be able to access. My son who has ADHD and is autistic gets so much support from the activity hosts and has a great time learning how to be social. Without these opportunities my children would not be as confident to try new things and I certainly enjoy the respite from it and get to run all the errands needed sage in the knowledge that my children are well cared for and having a great time.*
- *They loved the chance to do something new- go to a farm -and make new friends, it's also encouraged one of them to join a new club.*
- *Summer in Dorset allowed me to work knowing that my son was participating in fun activities with other children rather than spending his days glued to the Xbox!*
- *Very much needed. My child really enjoyed the activities and gave her a break from home life with a complex needs brother*

This year's data and feedback have highlighted several key areas for development:

- Secondary-aged engagement remains lower, with feedback from parents highlighting a need for more age-appropriate provision
- The programme continues to have a strong positive impact on children's wellbeing, particularly in reducing isolation and building friendships
- Healthy eating outcomes require further development, particularly in influencing longer-term behaviours
- Demand for SEND provision remains high, reinforcing the importance of workforce capacity and inclusive practice

These insights have directly informed our priorities and action plan for 2026.

9. Case Studies – WOW Opportunities

Case Study: WOW opportunities

Overview

WOW opportunities allow children and providers to take part in activities they may not usually have access to. These include ukulele and music technology sessions, cooking workshops delivered by the Friendly Food Club, visits from the Action Van, and sessions with Mini Professors, a Dorset-based STEM provider offering fun, hands-on experiences for children and young people. Most WOW providers are brought into existing HAF provision and deliver at least one session in each setting each year.

Objectives

1. To give children and young people attending the HAF programme the opportunity to take part in activities they would not normally experience.
2. To give providers the chance to learn new skills that they can use in future HAF activities.
3. To increase the range of STEM, cookery, and cultural activities available within the programme.

Attendance: Over 120 sessions were delivered by wow providers in 2025/2026.

Case Study: THE FRIENDLY FOOD CLUB



Holiday Activities & Food Programme

Dorset Council & Friendly Food Club 2025

Summary of activity

Holiday	No of sessions	No of providers	No children reached/meals served
Easter 25	11	11	280
Summer 25	28.5	24	514 +400+ events
Christmas 25	6	6	112+ 130 events (132 Christmas gift bags)
Total	44.5		906 at HAF sessions 530 at events

Children's feedback

Scarlett, 5: "I liked cooking with Andria. She showed us how to use the sharp knife to cut the carrots without cutting our fingers. I squashed garlic and grated the carrot, and we used a frying pan to fry the chicken, which was fun."

Poppy, 8: "I peeled ginger and chopped it up. I haven't done that before."

Arthur, five agreed: "I have never used a grater before, and it was fun. I would like to do more cooking."





Kit, 8: "I give the lunch we made ten out of ten, the chicken was the best and I especially liked squashing the garlic."

97% children said "I've learned something new today"

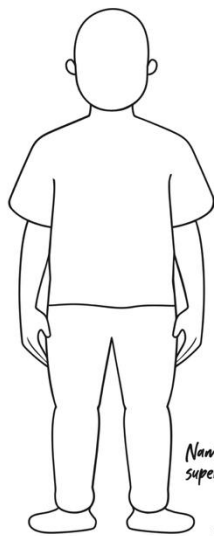
This year's food worksheet - 500 distributed

FRUIT AND VEGETABLE POWER!

Design your own fruit and vegetable-powered Superhero!

-  Choose **5** fruits and vegetables that give your superhero their powers.
-  Each one must be a **different** colour!
-  Draw or write them on each part of your superhero.
-  What special powers do they give him or her?

FRIENDLY FOOD CLUB
Cooking up healthier futures



Name your superhero



RED	Tomato, Strawberry, Raspberry, Red Pepper
ORANGE	Orange, Carrot, Squash
YELLOW	Lemon, Sweetcorn
GREEN	Peas, Broccoli, Apple, Grape, Kiwi, Spinach
PURPLE	Blueberry, Grape, Blackberry, Aubergine
WHITE	Mushroom, Onion, Cauliflower, Garlic

Here are some ideas to get you started

? What other fruits and vegetables can you think of?

Ages
7-11



Provider feedback

Gemma Edwards, Senior instructor at Cumulus said: “We’re very happy to welcome the Friendly Food Club back today. The children really enjoy the classes, and are not only cooking, but are also learning about healthy foods and developing life skills. The imaginative recipes mean they are also trying some things they maybe haven’t tried before, which is good, because children can be fussy about food. They all have a great time, eat some great food and grow in confidence, all things we are firmly committed to at Cumulus.”

“The children were engaged from the beginning; they were inquisitive and most were willing to try new things. They had access to various types of equipment depending on their age and skill level and were encouraged to use new techniques.

The children were pleased with their wraps and eager to take them home at the end of the day!”

“It was a great activity, children really enjoyed trying the new food and lots of conversations from parents about the food at home. Encourages good conversations between families.”

“It gave them something new to try and do over the summer It taught them lots of skills such as knife safety It allowed them to take risks It taught them about healthy food options, what food look like in raw states such as herbs, how to follow a recipe and put foods together to make a meal It allowed them to have a sensory experience smelling and tasting foods They had good fun”

“The children/young people really enjoy taking part in the preparation and cooking, even if not all are willing to try the finished item! They learn a lot about fruit and veg and cooking in general, together with safe cooking /cutting skills. They also learn to share and be part of a team”

What a great year!! Looking forward to 2026 for more tasty recipes and great cooking!

10. Marketing and Branding

Strategic Context: Moving to a “Schools Out” Holistic Offer

Over the past year, Dorset has begun a strategic shift in how we present and deliver support to children, young people and families during school holiday periods. While the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme has traditionally focused on discrete holiday periods—particularly summer—we are now moving towards a more holistic “Schools Out” approach.

This shift reflects our ambition to:

- Provide joined-up support across all school closure periods, promoting both HAF provision and paid for out of school's holiday clubs
- Align services more closely with family needs year-round, working closing with Family Information Services to promote all funding opportunities for provisions and families such as tax-free childcare to support families outside of the HAF funding periods.
- Reduce fragmentation by integrating HAF provision with wraparound childcare and enrichment

By bringing together HAF and wraparound childcare under a single, more cohesive narrative, we aim to:

- Improve accessibility and understanding for families
- Strengthen continuity of care and provision
- Ensure consistent messaging across services and partners

As part of this transition, our branding has been refreshed to reflect this broader, more inclusive offer. The move away from a singular “seasonal-focused” identity toward a “Schools Out” framework ensures that families recognise the full range of support available throughout the year.

During 2025–2026, Dorset has also aligned its programme approach with the government’s “Best Start in Life” agenda, which emphasises the importance of early intervention, equitable access to opportunities, and improved outcomes for children and families.

In support of this, we have:

- Reviewed how HAF contributes to wider early help and prevention priorities
- Strengthened links with education, childcare and family support services
- Ensured our delivery model reflects a whole-system approach to child wellbeing

To support this alignment, our branding has been updated to more closely reflect national government messaging and visual identity. This change enables Dorset to:

- Clearly demonstrate alignment with national priorities and frameworks
- Reinforce consistent messaging to families, partners and stakeholders
- Increase recognition and trust through familiar, government-aligned design and language

The updated branding and messaging ensure that our local offer:

- Sits confidently within the national policy landscape
- Communicates a clear, unified vision of support
- Emphasises the shared goal of giving every child in Dorset the best possible start in life

The impact of this change will be in place for Summer 2026 onwards.

Visual examples:

- Updated HAF promotional leaflet for families in line with BSIL colour, branding and promoting new Schools Out messaging.



For the years of 2025-26 prior to Summer 2026, where we previously categorise our offer into three distinct segments:

1. Easter in Dorset
2. Summer in Dorset
3. Winter in Dorset



Each holiday period had its own dedicated webpage and accompanying promotional materials, which parents and young people are directed to throughout the respective holidays.

Analytics of HAF programme page from June 2025 to June 2026

From website analytics we can see sharp boosts of page activity that coincides with the promotional activity we have run, so we can determine that we are delivering this traffic to the pages.

The first spike in summer can correlate to an email and print campaign to schools to share with parents on 23 June when listings were live. The second larger spike in the start of July can be attributed to a follow up email campaign pushing for attendance to booked space. This showcases the importance of email campaigns at directing traffic towards our site and reminding HAF families to visit and book their spaces. The consistent flurry of spikes across summer and the spikes in winter (November and December spikes) and Easter (March and April) can all be attributed to our communication campaigns and when the listings of the activities were live and promoted.

Our communication list of active HAF parents is now at an audience of 3,167, showing a consistent strong growth since previous periods (2,605 recipients summer in Dorset 2025, 1,186 Easter in Dorset 2025.)

For future communication we expect a reduction of audience due to the changes to eligibility to free school meals from September 2026.

11. Opportunities for improvement and future plans

The 2025 – 2026 delivery of HAF was a great success however we are always keen to make it even better. Next year we will focus on the following areas of improvement

Priority 1: Increase Engagement with Secondary-Aged Young People

Priority 2: Stabilise and Increase Attendance Across All Holidays

Priority 3: Improve Healthy Eating Outcomes

Priority 4: Strengthen SEND Inclusion and Workforce Capacity

12. Action Plan for 2025- 2026

Priority 1: Increase Engagement with Secondary-Aged Young People

Issue: Low participation from secondary-aged children compared to primary

Actions:

- Develop targeted provision (outdoor, social, skills-based)
- Work with providers to design age-appropriate programmes
- Consult young people to co-produce activities

Success Measures:

- 5–10% increase in participation per holiday
- Improved feedback from teenagers
- More providers offering secondary sessions

Timeframe: Spring 2025 – Ongoing

Lead: HAF Lead / Providers / Youth Voice

Priority 2: Stabilise and Increase Attendance

Issue: Slight decline in attendance

Actions:

- Work with Childcare Sufficiency Co-ordinator
- Explore additional funding
- Deliver year-round marketing campaign

Success Measures:

- Increase attendance year-on-year

- Improved take-up of places

Timeframe: Spring 2025 – Ongoing

Lead: HAF Lead / Sufficiency Team / Comms

Priority 3: Improve Healthy Eating Outcomes

Issue: Limited impact on healthy eating behaviours

Actions:

- Expand partnerships (e.g. Friendly Food Club)
- Increase cooking sessions
- Encourage family involvement

Success Measures:

- Improved healthy eating knowledge
- Positive parent feedback
- More food sessions delivered

Timeframe: Summer 2025 – Ongoing

Lead: HAF Lead / Providers / Partners

Priority 4: Strengthen SEND Inclusion

Issue: High SEND demand requires ongoing support

Actions:

- Maintain ringfenced funding
- Expand training
- Collaborate with SEND specialists

Success Measures:

- Sustained participation
- Positive family feedback
- More trained staff

Timeframe: Spring 2025 – Ongoing

Lead: HAF Lead / SEND Team / Providers

Conclusion

The HAF Programme builds directly on Dorset Council’s strategic shift towards a more integrated “Best Start in Life” (BSIL) approach. As outlined earlier in this report, HAF is no longer viewed as a standalone holiday programme but as a key component of a wider early help system that supports children, young people, and families year-round

Through its delivery of nutritious food, enriching activities, and targeted provision, HAF contributes to improving outcomes for children by ensuring they are healthy, safe, socially connected, and ready to learn during and beyond school holidays.

Importantly, the programme plays a preventative role within Dorset’s early help offer by:

- Reducing social isolation during school holidays
- Supporting children’s physical and emotional wellbeing
- Strengthening engagement with education and improving transitions back to school
- Providing structured, safe environments for vulnerable children
- Supporting working families and reducing pressure on households

This aligns strongly with Dorset Council’s wider corporate objectives, particularly:

- Supporting the most vulnerable children and families
- Improving health and wellbeing outcomes
- Reducing inequality and improving access to opportunities
- Delivering effective early help and prevention services

Furthermore, HAF’s integration with Family Hubs, childcare provision, and community partners strengthens pathways into wider support services, ensuring families can access help earlier and more effectively.