



Suffolk Holiday Activity and Food Programme

**Annual Report
1st April 2024 - 31st March 2025**



Who are we?

Introduction and Background

Suffolk is a predominantly rural county in the East of England, spanning nearly 1,500 square miles and bordered by 50 miles of coastline. It shares boundaries with Essex, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk, and features a diverse landscape of farmland, marshes, wetlands, Broadlands, and coastal areas. Picturesque and tranquil, Suffolk's natural beauty is one of its greatest assets, but it also presents unique challenges.

While the rural and coastal environment offers a high quality of life, it also contributes to economic difficulties. Employment opportunities are often seasonal, and jobs in villages and countryside areas are limited. Public transport to major towns can be unreliable or inaccessible, leaving many residents (particularly in remote areas) struggling to find sustainable work. As a result, poverty remains a significant issue in parts of the county.



Who are we?

Introduction and Background continued

Rising Need: Free School Meals in Suffolk

At the start of 2024, over 26,000 children in Suffolk were registered for means-tested Free School Meals (FSM). By the end of the year, this number had risen to well over 28,000. However, we know this figure does not capture the full extent of need. Many families who qualify are not listed, and others may choose not to take up the offer despite being eligible.



In response, we are working toward implementing automatic enrolment for FSM to ensure that no child goes without access to nutritious meals due to administrative barriers or lack of awareness.

Who are we?

Introduction and Background continued

The Impact of School Holidays

National research highlights the additional strain that school holidays place on families already facing financial hardship. During these periods, increased household costs and reduced income can lead to:

- ***Poorer nutrition or missed meals***
- ***Reduced participation in physical and social activities***
- ***Heightened family stress***
- ***Mental health challenges***
- ***Lower school attendance and performance***
- ***Delayed emotional and social development***

The Role of HAF (Holiday Activities and Food) Provision

Evidence shows that children who attend HAF programmes during school holidays benefit in numerous ways:

- ***Improved engagement and performance at school***
- ***Better mental and physical health***
- ***Reduced family stress***
- ***Increased confidence and self-esteem***
- ***Enhanced social and emotional development***
- ***Access to enriching, fun, and active experiences***

Who are we?

Introduction and Background continued

Looking Ahead

We are proud of the work we've done to support families across Suffolk, but we recognise that there is still much more to do.

By expanding access to essential services like Free School Meals and HAF programmes, we aim to ensure that everychild in Suffolk has the opportunity to thrive - regardless of their background and whatever their circumstances.



Steering Group

The Suffolk HAF (Holiday Activities and Food) Steering Group is a collaborative partnership made up of the following organisations:

- **Suffolk County Council**
- **East Suffolk District Council**
- **West Suffolk District Council**
- **Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils (working in partnership)**
- **Ipswich Borough Council**
- **Activities Unlimited**
- **Suffolk Libraries Service**

The group meets bi-weekly to coordinate and strengthen the delivery of the HAF programme across the county. Our meetings focus on:

- **Joint planning and programme delivery**
- **Coordinated marketing and outreach strategies**
- **Problem-solving and addressing operational challenges**
- **Expanding our reach to underserved communities**
- **Sharing updates and insights on programme performance**
- **Policies and other document creation and implementation**

Through this collaborative approach, we aim to ensure that the HAF programme continues to grow in impact, accessibility, and effectiveness for children and families across Suffolk.

Finance

The Suffolk Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme was awarded £2,233,780 by the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver services from April 2024 to March 2025. The programme's core objective is to provide nutritious meals and enriching activities to children eligible for means-tested Free School Meals during the Spring, Summer, and Winter school holidays.

Expenditure Breakdown

Direct Delivery of HAF Activities:

A total of £1,845,878.36 was allocated to the direct delivery of holiday programmes across the three main school holidays. This represents the majority of the funding and reflects our commitment to maximising impact for children and families.

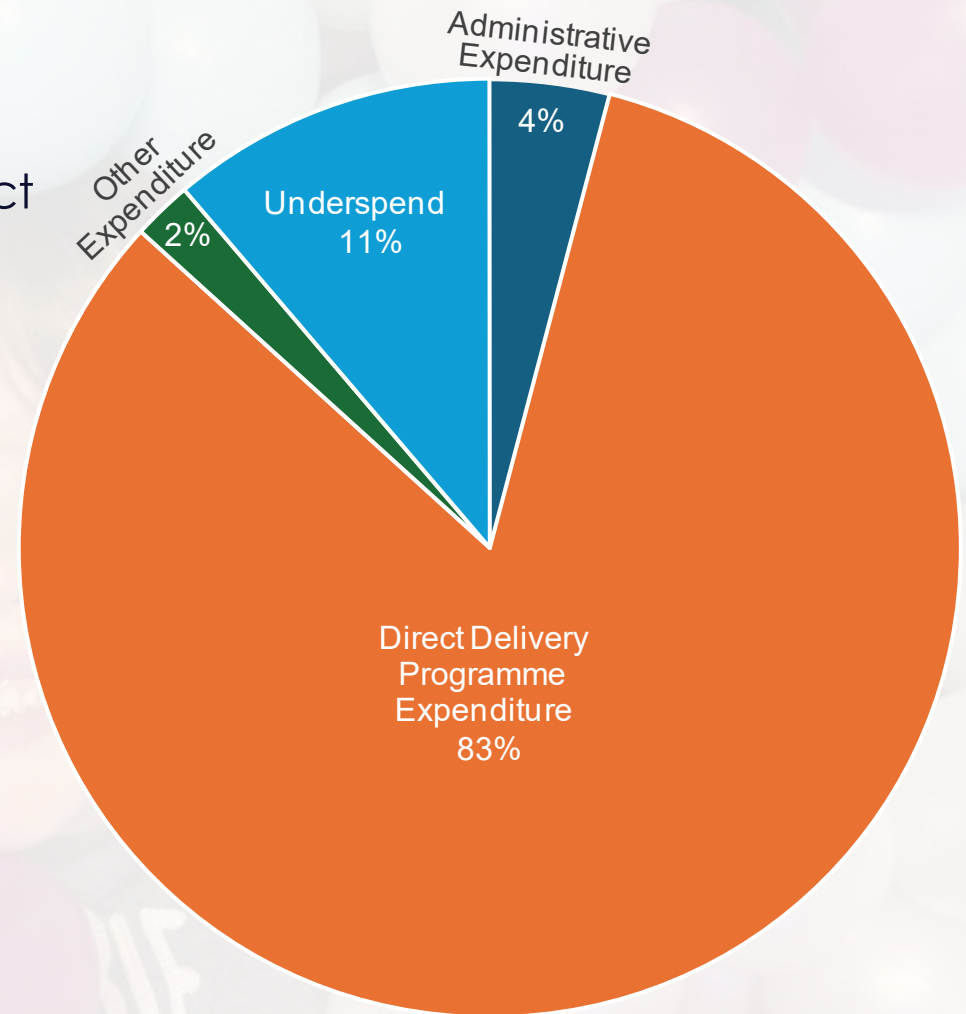
Programme Administration and Management:

Administrative and management costs for the year totalled £91,471.81, covering coordination, oversight, and operational support.

Miscellaneous Costs:

An additional £45,797.57 was spent on essential support services, including:

- **Booking system infrastructure**
- **Travel expenses for site visits**
- **Equipment storage**
- **Return of under spend from the previous year**



The Participants

In 2024 we had a dip in attendance due to a number of factors.

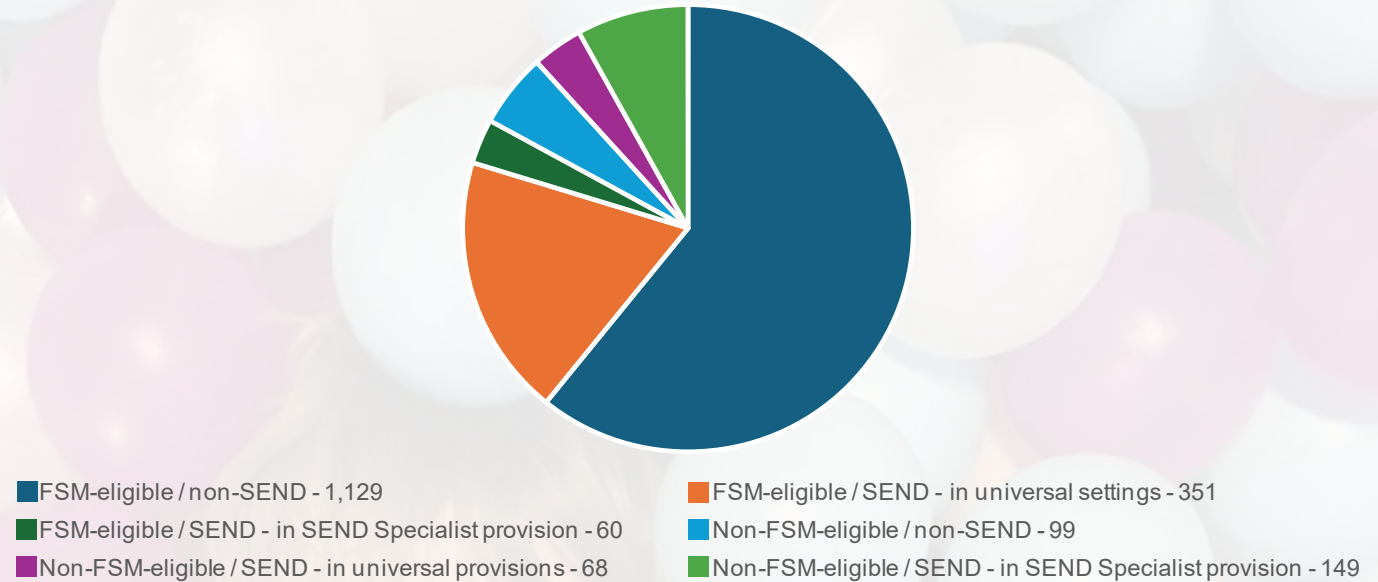
We aim to improve on this as we move into 2025.

We reached a total of 10,320 unique children over the whole of 2024.

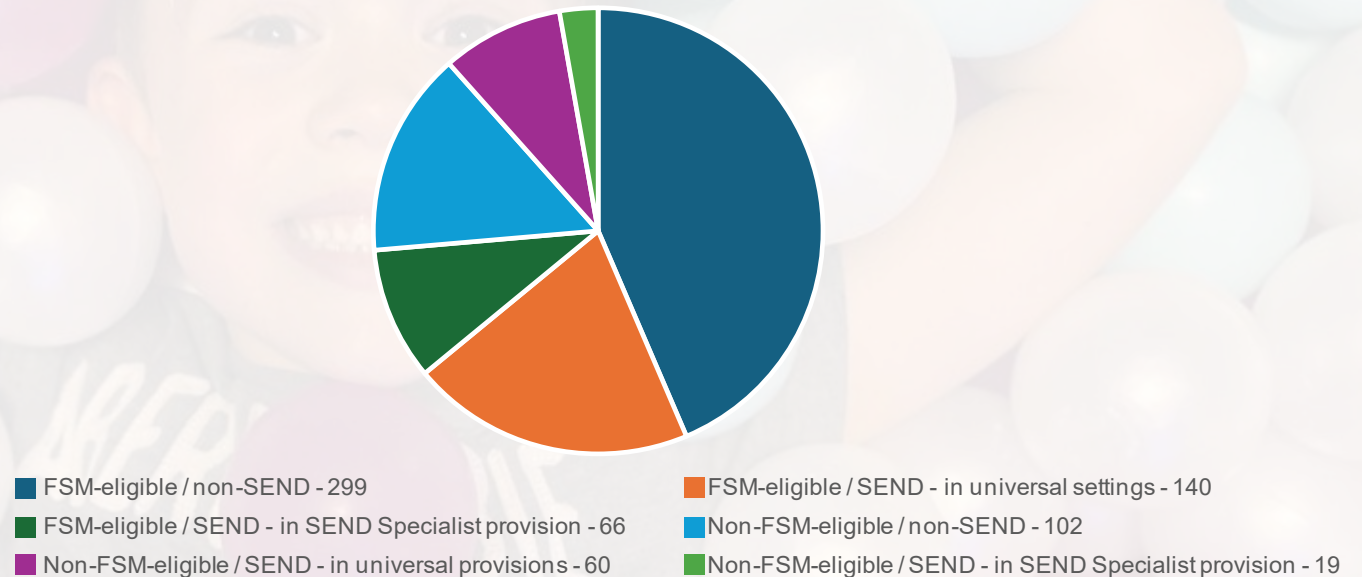
The three seasons follow in more detail...

EASTER:

Easter 2024 Primary Aged Unique Children Reached



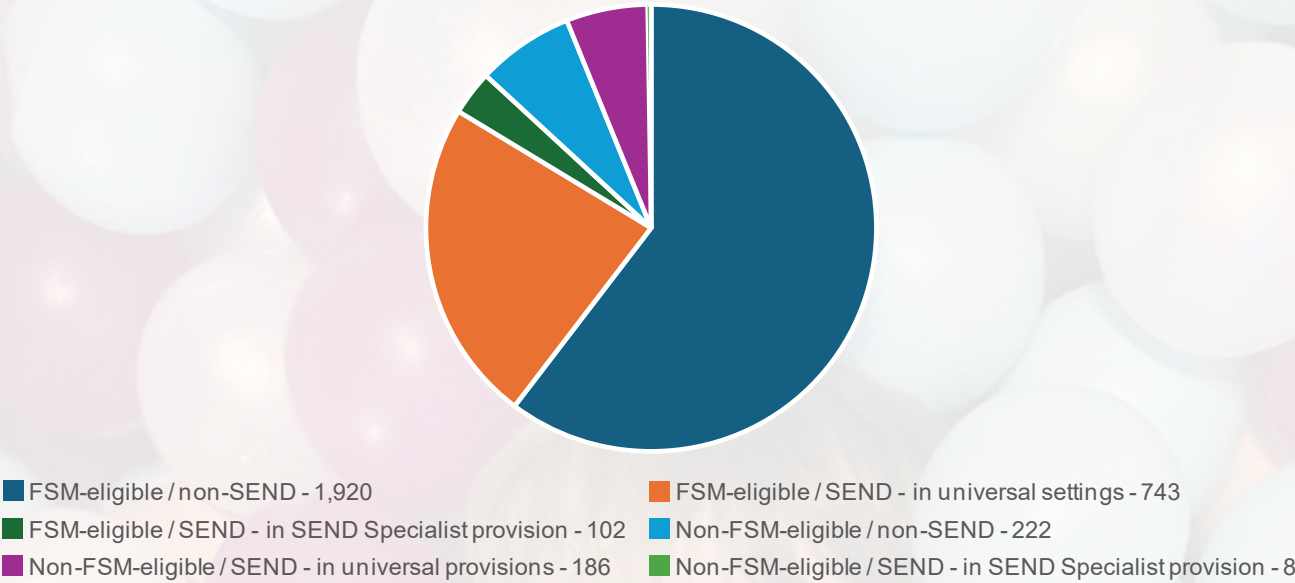
Easter 2024 Secondary Aged Unique Children Reached



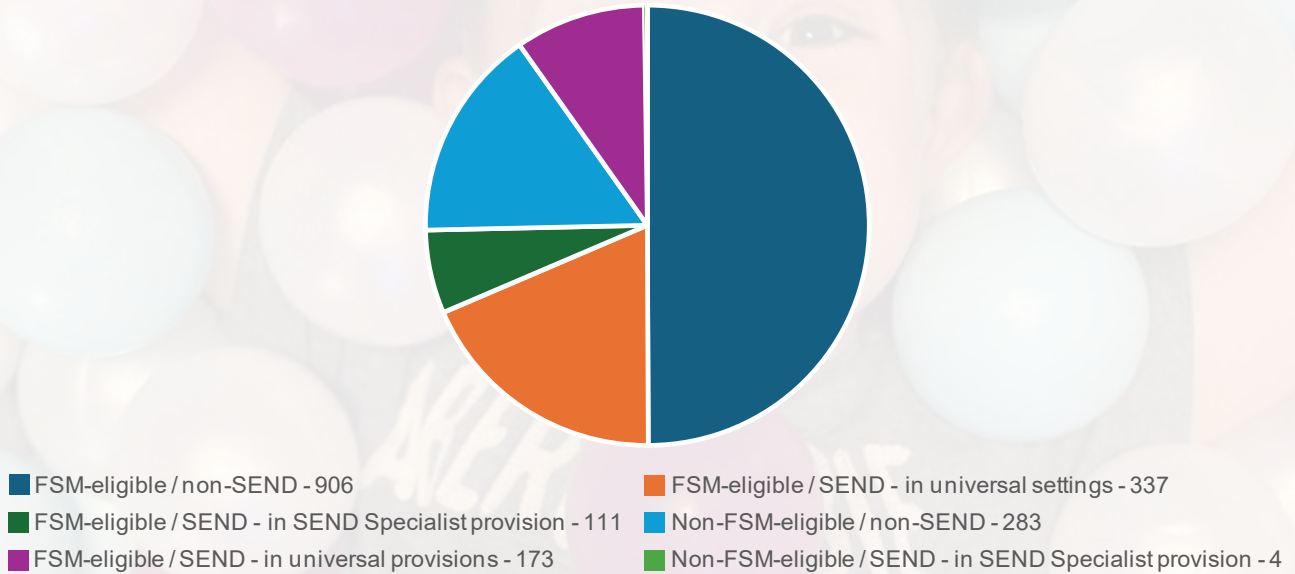
The Participants **continued**

SUMMER:

Summer 2024 Primary Aged Unique Children Reached



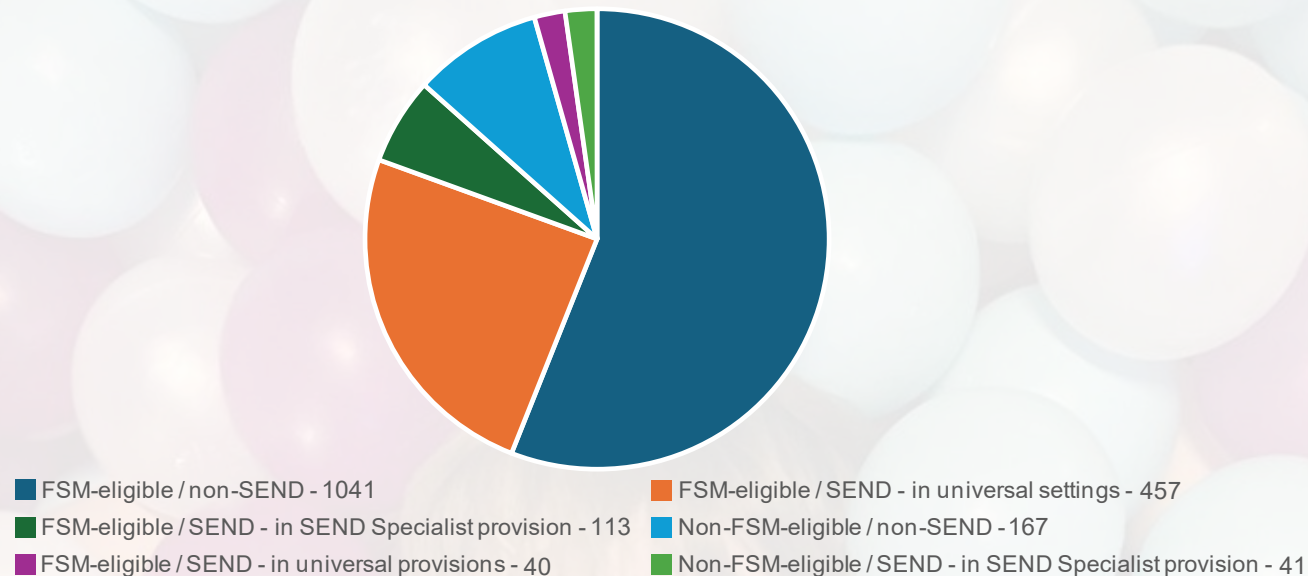
Summer 2024 - Secondary Aged Unique Children Reached



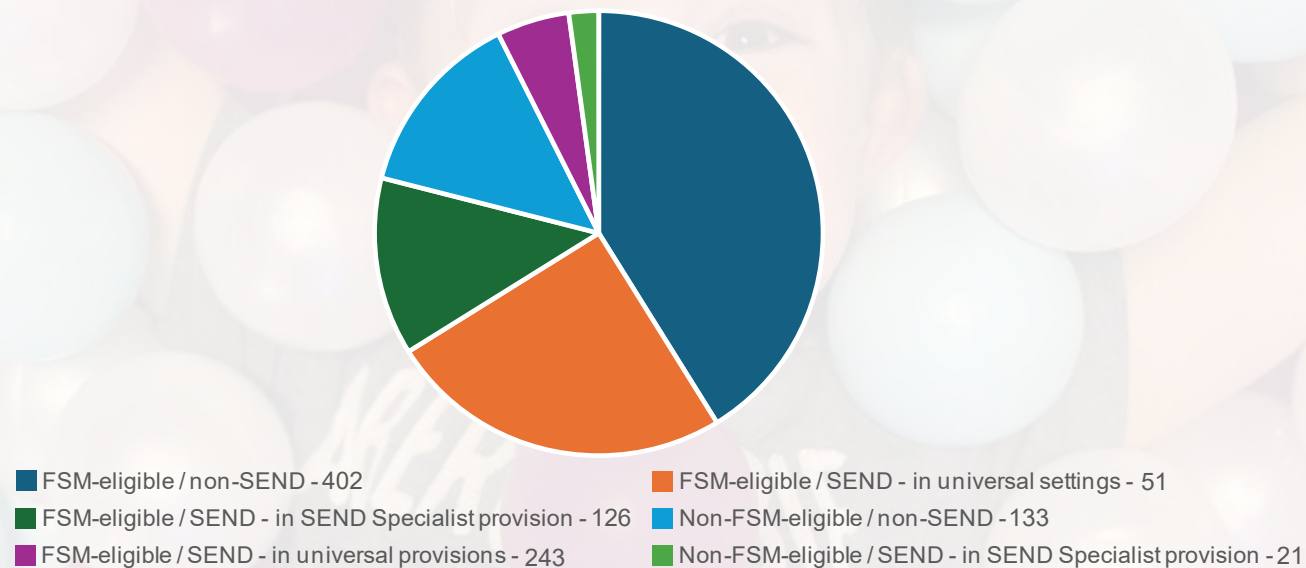
The Participants **continued**

WINTER:

Winter 2024 Primary Age Unique Children Reached



Winter 2024 Secondary Age Unique Children Reached



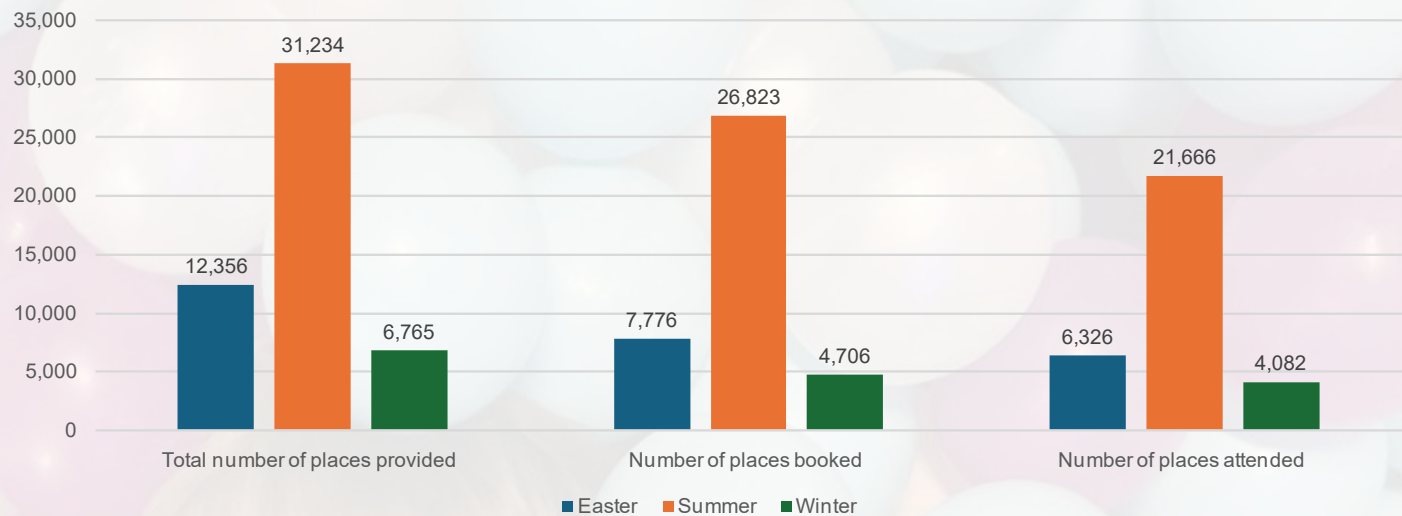
The Participants continued

We provided a yearly total of 52,488 places at our activities, both universal settings and SEND specialist settings.

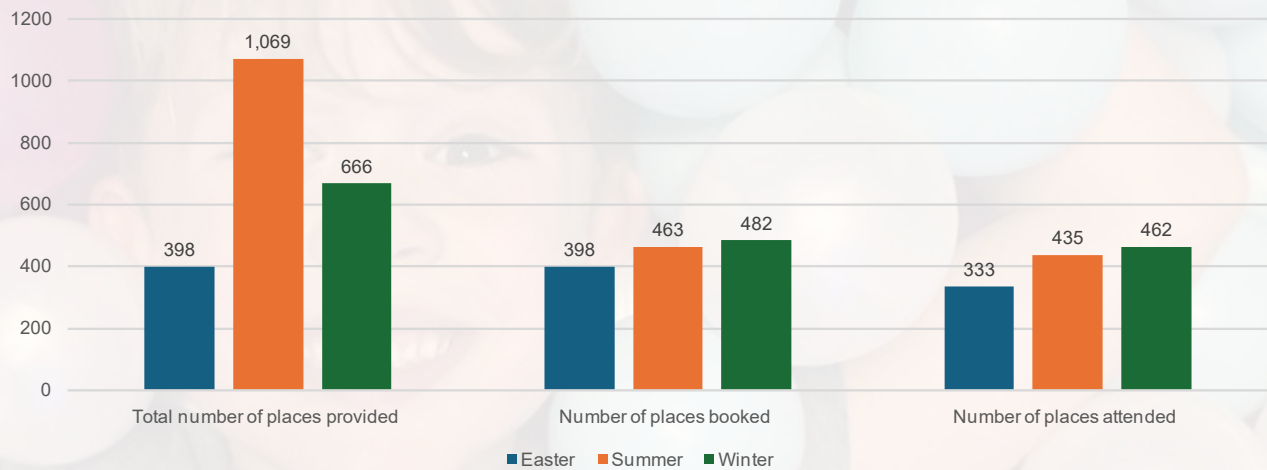
A total of 40,648 places were booked at the point of delivery and a total of 33,304 places were attended.

Here is a breakdown of each season for both Universal settings and SEND:

Total number of Universal places 2024



SEND specialist places 2024



The Participants **continued**

Expanding Our Reach and Improving Delivery

Throughout the year, we have worked proactively to expand our reach to eligible families, exploring new and diverse methods of communication and engagement. These efforts have been instrumental in connecting with more families in need of support.

Our early delivery phase faced challenges due to adverse weather conditions, particularly during the Easter holidays, which fell earlier in the spring and was marked by poor weather. Despite this, our reach steadily increased over the course of the year, supported by improved data collection and analysis with each successive season.

As the number of families requiring support continues to grow, we are committed to building on this progress.

Looking ahead to our 2025/26 delivery, we aim to further extend our reach and ensure that every eligible child has access to the benefits of the HAF programme.



The Providers

"I have worked on different HAF projects for the last 5 years and love everything that it stands for. When I purchased my franchise last year HAF was a non-negotiable for my business and I am constantly sharing HAF with my franchise network and supporting new franchisees with how they can roll out a HAF project in their area. I constantly say I want to make Performing Arts accessible for ALL children and HAF is one way that we can work towards this". **Evie - Little Voices**

"It is great to see so many children from Lowestoft and surrounds enjoying structured activity. The diverse programme Everyone Active offers, is exciting and appealing for children of all ages and we see so many happy, enthused faces when delivering sports, rock climbing, literacy, and soft play activities during the holiday periods. Long may it continue!" **Everyone Active**

"HAF enables Earthwake to provide freedom and choice to participants, allowing them to learn new skills, work together, develop independence, get closer to nature, enjoy cooking and eating healthy food. With support from our staff, the children prepare and cook their own food, they relax in hammocks, play active games, learn how to light fires and how to use tools. They go home with handmade crafts and woodwork constructions, maybe muddy clothes, and smiles on their faces!" **Earthwake**

"I would like to say that HAF helps to make the vital work of Home for Good Suffolk possible and sustainable. Home for Good Suffolk connects families caring for care experienced children. Children who have complex additional and SEND needs. Children who struggle with everyday life, relationships, the challenges of school as well as simple everyday activities like meal times, bath times and bedtimes. HAF money enables these amazing children to experience educational, sensory based, relational activities which give them opportunities in the school holidays to regulate their sensory systems, grow in confidence, gain new skills, make and sustain friendships and all while having fun. As the Lead Co-ordinator for Home for Good Suffolk, I would like to say a BIG THANK YOU FOR HELPING THESE AMAZING CHILDREN REACH THEIR POTENTIAL".
Home For Good

We proudly funded 87 different providers, offering a diverse range of activities to ensure that every child had something to enjoy. Our efforts have connected us with both large established organisations and small local charities, creating a strong network of support across Suffolk.

Through these partnerships, we have fostered safe and fun environments for families - places where children can learn new skills, build friendships, experience joyful moments and lasting memories.

Each season, we welcome new providers while embracing returning favourites, ensuring continued access to high-quality experiences for all. We would like to thank our providers for their dedicated support of our programme in 2024.

The Activities

Engaging Activities and Holistic Support for Suffolk Families

Over the course of the year, the Suffolk HAF Programme facilitated over 500 activities, ensuring that every child had the opportunity to participate in experiences tailored to their interests and needs. These activities spanned a wide range, including:

- **Arts and crafts**
- **Swimming**
- **Outdoor cooking**
- **Wild play**
- **Bike and horse riding**
- **Film creation and special effects makeup**
- **Football, gymnastics, and much more**

We partnered with a diverse network of providers - some offering multi-day programmes with varied activities, while others delivered specialised sessions over shorter durations. This flexible model empowered families to choose experiences that best suited their children, fostering enjoyment, skill development, and meaningful social connections.

Through our dedicated providers, Suffolk HAF has cultivated an environment where children can connect with like-minded peers and be guided by inspiring mentors. Whether through sports, creative pursuits, or personal growth, our programmes offer children the chance to explore their passions or try something new in a supportive and inclusive space.

"Thank you for these last three days - she loves it and it's really the only respite we get so we are eternally grateful."

HAF Parent

"They had such a good day. Can't wait to go again. They loved cooking. Thank you for providing a fun day for my family"

HAF Parent

"It was amazing! They want to go again, they want to continue with things they did, they want to take friends to share their experience"

HAF Parent

"I just wanted to say thank you to you and all the team for looking after my son this week. Particularly yesterday when I was stuck in traffic on the bridge for over an hour and so worried about how he would cope. I am so disappointed to have missed the sharing at the end of the day, but I know there'll be many more as my son is determined to become a permanent fixture now!"

HAF Parent

"They had lots of fun and can't wait to go swimming again. This was the first time I have ever used HAF so I didn't really know what to expect but everything was so easy."

HAF Parent

"She was talking away a lot once we got home and has asked to help prepare some of our meals. These are great sessions and the box of fresh food that we get to bring home is fantastic. It helps so much over the holidays when the children are home all of the time eating everything in the cupboard/fridge"

HAF Parent

The Activities continued

Promoting Healthy Living

A core focus of the HAF initiative is promoting healthy lifestyles. Each day of activities includes nutritious meals, ensuring children receive the fuel they need to thrive. Providers integrate healthy eating and physical activity into their daily programming, helping children build habits that support lifelong well-being. Even in programmes not centred around physical activity, we encourage movement and positive lifestyle choices, making wellness an essential part of every experience. Providers are supported to deliver guidance on exercise, nutrition, and overall health in engaging and age-appropriate ways.

Positive Feedback and Impact

Feedback from both parents/carers and children has been overwhelmingly positive. Families consistently report that the programme strikes a strong balance between fun, learning, and support - creating an inclusive and enriching experience for all.

"Attending Family Park Cooking last year really transformed us as a family. Before that we could not get the children interested in outdoor activities. But coming along and spending time outside, learning about lighting fires safely, cooking and doing activities changed all that. The children immediately wanted to join the scouting movement. Seeing you lead the day inspired me as well to become a scout leader. Teaching scouts is now my favourite part of the week – in fact I even miss it this week as its half term and there is none. Next week I am starting my own new Cub group in Mildenhall on a day of the week that previously there was demand for one but none running. We all love it." **HAF Parents**

"My children love playing football. They both said "it was the best day ever! Can we go again!?" My son is type 1 diabetic and I was very nervous about leaving him, but the coaches were absolutely amazing at looking after him and also keeping me updated which put me at ease and it was nice for him to have some freedom too! This was a really hard step for me to take but definitely a positive in that I will feel more willing to let him go to more." **HAF Parents**

"They loved it, mum (with limited English) enjoyed mixing with other parents. It was a really positive experience for both the mum and her children. Many thanks" **HAF Parent**

Food

Feeding Bodies, Fuelling Joy – Our Holiday Food Offer

At Suffolk HAF, we understand that while schools provide nutritious meals during term time, many families face financial strain during the holidays, making it harder to access healthy food. That's why every child attending our activities receives a healthy meal and snacks as part of their day. Our providers are challenged—and supported—to deliver food that is not only nutritious and balanced but also child-friendly, allergy-aware, and inclusive of religious dietary needs. Many children have shared that they don't usually have access to foods like fresh fruit at home. We take pride in ensuring that each child enjoys a meal that is both nourishing and joyful.

We adapt our food offer to suit the season:

- In warmer months, cold options such as healthy wraps, sandwiches, yoghurts, fruits, and snacks are offered—light, fresh, and well-loved by children.
- In winter, hot meals like baked potatoes with a variety of fillings are especially popular, providing warmth and comfort on chilly days.

Through our outdoor cooking sessions, children learn to cook nutritious meals like vegetarian stews - a big hit that fills the site with irresistible aromas and happy faces.

During colder months, we also support families through winter food boxes. These include easy-to-follow recipes and ingredients that families can cook together at home. The children take pride in helping with the meals, turning food prep into bonding time. Towards Christmas, we offered special festive food boxes containing everything needed for a full Christmas dinner—these were incredibly popular and booked up fast.



Healthy Eating in Childhood

Healthy eating in childhood lays the foundation for a lifetime of wellbeing. Here are some of the key benefits:

Physical Growth and Development

- Supports strong bones and teeth through nutrients like calcium and vitamin D
- Fuels muscle development and energy levels for active play and learning
- Helps maintain a healthy weight, reducing the risk of obesity and related conditions

Brain and Cognitive Function

- Nutrients like omega-3s, iron, and B vitamins support brain development and concentration
- A balanced diet improves memory, alertness, and academic performance

Immune System and Disease Prevention

- A variety of fruits and vegetables provide vitamins A, C, and E, which boost immunity
- Healthy eating reduces the risk of chronic diseases later in life, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease

Emotional and Mental Wellbeing

- Stable blood sugar from balanced meals helps regulate mood and behaviour
- Children who eat well are more likely to feel confident, focused, and emotionally resilient

Establishing Lifelong Habits

- Early exposure to healthy foods builds positive eating patterns that often continue into adulthood
- Encourages curiosity and openness to trying new foods and flavours

SEND

Our SEND Offering

As part of our commitment to inclusivity, we provide a comprehensive SEND offer, ensuring that every child has access to enriching activities in a safe and welcoming environment. Many of our providers design experiences that give SEND children the chance to explore new opportunities, participating in activities they may not have encountered before. Additionally, we offer a range of experiences tailored specifically for SEND children, fostering engagement, enjoyment, and personal growth.

Activities Unlimited, a valued member of our Steering Group, plays a vital role in organising and managing our SEND provision. Over the year, we have delivered exciting opportunities, including farm visits, crafts, horse-riding, soft play and more, creating unforgettable moments for families across Suffolk.



Reaching Children Beyond the Activity Spaces

We recognise that not every child is able to attend in-person HAF sessions due to health limitations or complex needs. To ensure these children aren't left behind, we introduced sensory boxes - a beloved solution designed to bring wonder and enrichment directly into their homes. Each box is filled with carefully selected sensory toys and tools that support the development and enjoyment of children with SEND. These resources stimulate curiosity and calm through textures, sounds, light, and interactive elements - providing meaningful sensory engagement even when children are unable to attend in person.

Parents and carers have shared overwhelmingly positive feedback, describing the boxes as a thoughtful, joyful gift that offers both stimulation and comfort. The popularity and impact of these boxes reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of circumstance, can feel included and supported.

As always, our commitment extends beyond activities - we ensure that every child has access to nutritious meals, with flexible options that accommodate food intolerances and religious beliefs.

This emphasis on healthy living reinforces our goal of creating an inclusive and supportive environment where all families can feel welcomed and cared for.



Challenges

Enhancing Accessibility with a New Booking Platform

This year, we introduced a streamlined booking platform, revolutionising the way families engage with Suffolk HAF. By transitioning from a voucher-led provision to a direct booking system, we gained valuable tools for reporting and in-depth data analysis, allowing us to identify areas for growth and build on our strengths.

While the transition came with initial challenges, as families, schools, and providers adjusted to the new system, the benefits became clear. Now, families can conveniently view all available activities in one place, using features like interactive maps to find local opportunities. The real-time booking insights enable us to monitor uptake and respond proactively, ensuring accessibility for all.

Weather-related disruptions continued to pose a challenge for our programme throughout the year. During the Easter delivery, cold and wet conditions led to a number of cancelled and unattended bookings. Later in the year, hot weather saw further drop-offs, as many families chose to make spontaneous coastal visits—a natural choice given Suffolk's proximity to the seaside.

While we make regular contact with families in the lead-up to booked sessions, we continue to see non-attendance figures that highlight the need for a fresh approach. Addressing this issue will be a key priority in 2025, with strategies being explored to better support families and providers alike.

The early summer delivery was also affected by the tragic events in Southport, which understandably heightened concerns among parents and carers. Many cancelled bookings out of fear in response to this incident. In collaboration with our providers, we implemented enhanced security measures and revised safeguarding policies, placing child safety at the heart of our response.

We remain committed to ensuring that all staff are trained and informed, and we are continuously reviewing our procedures to prevent and respond to serious incidents with vigilance and care.

Challenges continued

Strengthening Leadership and Overcoming Challenges

In early 2024, changes in staffing brought challenges to the delivery of Suffolk HAF. The departure of the program lead at the start of the year left a gap until the role was filled after Easter.

Combined with key shifts within the Steering Group, this placed strain on early-year organisation and summer delivery. However, we have since built a strong, collaborative team, forming valuable alliances to drive the continued success of Suffolk HAF.

Like many HAF areas, we also faced early-year difficulties due to the delayed confirmation of project continuation. The late announcement impacted Easter planning, causing disruptions in program delivery and staffing.

Many providers struggled with the uncertainty, leading to staffing challenges and reduced availability. This issue resurfaced later in the year, as funding information for 2025/26 was not released until January 2025, prompting some providers to scale back Winter delivery or withdraw due to staff departures.

Despite these obstacles, Suffolk HAF remains committed to expanding opportunities for children and families, adapting to challenges, and building a resilient and thriving future for the program.

Marketing and Promotion

With the introduction of a new booking system earlier in the year and a new project lead joining later in the year just before summer delivery, we identified the need to dedicate more resources to promoting Suffolk HAF.

Leveraging the expertise of marketing teams from across our Steering Group, we developed new social media toolkits to help providers market their sessions and activities effectively.

The Social Media Toolkit



Want more for the kids to do in the Easter, summer and Christmas school holidays?

Children aged 5 to 16 who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals can access the Holiday Activities Fund (HAF) activities programme!

Access sports sessions, arts, crafts, dance and cooking classes for FREE!

Not eligible? Many providers also provide paid for spaces, so check out what is available.



Visit: www.suffolk.infolink.gov.uk to find out more - search 'Holiday Activities Fund'

Logos: Suffolk County Council, East Suffolk Council, Ipswich Council, West Suffolk Council, Department for Education, ACTIVITIES UNLIMITED, Suffolk County Council, HAF is funded by The Department of Education

We also expanded our promotional efforts through advertisements in Suffolk magazines aimed at families, ensuring greater visibility across the region.

Marketing and Promotion **continued**

To improve accessibility, we established a dedicated page on Suffolk Infolink, offering families information about our services and a direct link to our booking system. Our booking partner, Eequ, provided marketing and promotion opportunities, alongside guidance for providers on effectively showcasing their offerings.

We remained committed to engaging schools across Suffolk, regularly contacting them to promote Suffolk HAF to eligible families. Schools received newsletters, notices, and direct communications from the project manager, Steering Group, and key providers to ensure widespread awareness.

Towards the latter part of the year, the project manager implemented a direct marketing approach, creating targeted contact lists to reach parents and carers with available listings. This strategy had a significant positive impact on participation, proving to be one of our most successful marketing initiatives - one we plan to continue in the following year.

We continue to look at our marketing and promotion strategic plan, strengthening it as we go to ensure that our reach is greatly magnified to provide as many eligible families with the information on the benefits and opportunities on offer to them.

Some of the things we plan to work on further are:

- *Expanding digital outreach: Further developing targeted social media campaigns and leveraging influencers or community leaders to spread awareness.*
- *Strengthening local partnerships: Collaborating with schools, healthcare providers, and local businesses to amplify messaging.*
- *Improving accessibility: Ensuring families can easily navigate information, possibly through multilingual content or interactive guides.*
- *Data-driven optimization: Using engagement analytics to refine promotional efforts and focus on the most effective outreach methods.*

Looking Ahead with Gratitude and Purpose

The support we've received from the Department for Education has been absolutely vital in providing HAF for families. Without this funding, many of the families we serve would have missed out on the opportunities, enrichment, and lasting memories that have come to define the Suffolk HAF experience.

This funding is more than financial support - it's a gateway to connection, joy, and growth for children and their families.

We are truly honoured to have delivered this service to Suffolk's HAF families over the past few years. As we look ahead to 2025, we do so with optimism and determination - ready to grow, to strengthen our impact, and to continue offering fun, meaningful, and life-enriching experiences to every family we reach.

A Message of Thanks

A massive thank you to the Department for Education, our incredible providers, the dedicated Steering Group, and the hardworking teams who make Suffolk HAF possible.

But above all, thank you to the families—thank you for trusting us, welcoming us into your lives, and allowing us to share in your children's growth, joy, and discovery. It has been a true honour to enrich their lives with new opportunities and lasting memories.

We look forward to continuing this journey together.



