



Title of report: Holiday activities and food programme (HAF) 2026/27

Decision maker: Councillor Powell, Cabinet member Children and Young People

Corporate Director: Community wellbeing

Decision date: 26 February 2026

Report by: Talk Community Children and Engagement Manager

Classification

Open

Decision type

Non-key

Wards affected

(All Wards)

Purpose

To seek approval for Herefordshire Council to accept the Department for Education (DfE) grant to continue coordinating the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme, and to confirm the proposed allocation of funds, including authorisation to award grants to successful delivery organisations.

Summary

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme provides eligible children and young people with access to healthy meals and enriching activities during the Easter, Summer and Christmas school holidays, with a smaller offer available during the February and October half-term periods. The programme has been successfully delivered in Herefordshire since 2021.

The Government has confirmed its intention to continue funding the HAF Programme for a further three-year period, from April 2026 to March 2029. The indicative allocation for Herefordshire Council for the 2026/27 financial year is £481,240, with formal confirmation expected in early March 2026. Funding allocations for subsequent years will continue to be confirmed on an annual basis.

Of the 2026/27 allocation, £35,800 has been designated for capacity-building activity. This will be

delivered in collaboration with the Wraparound Childcare team to support market sustainability and alignment across childcare and holiday provision.

Participation in the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme will remain voluntary for children and young people. In line with national guidance, up to 15% of the grant may be used to support children who are not eligible for benefit-related free school meals, but who meet locally agreed discretionary criteria, ensuring flexibility to respond to local need.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **That Herefordshire Council accepts the Department for Education (DfE) grant to deliver the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme across Herefordshire for 2026/27.**
- b) **The scheme criteria is set out in paragraphs 2 to 19 of this report to be approved and;**
- c) **The Head of Communities be authorised to take all operational decisions necessary to implement the programme in line with the grant conditions.**

Alternative options

1. Not to accept or part accept the grant. This option is not recommended. Failure to accept the funding would significantly reduce the availability of holiday activities and nutritious food for eligible children and young people. This could increase the risk of isolation, reduced wellbeing and limited access to healthy meals during school holidays. The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme provides structured activities and nutritious food, and without this support children may experience less healthy holiday periods and fewer opportunities for social engagement.

Key considerations

2. The funding enables the coordination of free holiday provision for children and young people in Herefordshire who are eligible for benefit-related free school meals, currently totaling 4,568 school-aged children. The programme provides access to nutritious meals, alongside a broad range of enriching, face-to-face activities delivered during the Easter, Summer and Christmas school holidays, with a reduced offer available during the February and October half-term periods. Activities typically include physical exercise, cooking, arts and crafts, and other developmental opportunities that support children's health, wellbeing and learning. The provision helps to reduce the risk of social isolation during school holidays and is particularly important during the summer period, when the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is known to widen. In addition to direct provision for children, families benefit from food education and signposting to wider support services. Attendance is optional for eligible children, but the programme offers a valuable opportunity for the Council and its partners to deliver structured holiday activities, healthy meals and nutritional education across the county.
3. The proportion of children eligible for benefit-related free school meals in Herefordshire is just over 16%, compared with a national average of 25.7%. However, growing up in one of England's most rural counties brings distinct challenges, particularly in relation to access to services, transport and support. Significant and persistent inequalities remain across the county. While overall levels of child poverty are lower than the national average, some local areas experience substantially higher rates than others, reflecting a more dispersed pattern of disadvantage. Children's oral health outcomes in Herefordshire are also consistently poorer

than the England average, highlighting wider health and wellbeing inequalities that disproportionately affect children from lower-income households.

4. **HAF providers should ensure a high-quality provision that will result in:**
 - a) children receiving healthy and nutritious meals
 - b) children maintaining a healthy level of physical activity
 - c) children being happy, having fun and meeting new friends
 - d) children developing a greater understanding of food, nutrition and other health-related issues
 - e) children taking part in fun and engaging activities that support their development and well-being
 - f) children feeling safe and secure
 - g) children getting access to the right support services
 - h) children returning to school feeling engaged and ready to learn
5. The Government initially funded a one-year national pilot of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme in 2021/22. Following its success, the programme has been extended until March 2029. Herefordshire has delivered the programme in each year since its introduction. In 2025, more than 1,100 children participated in provision during the Easter, Summer and Christmas holiday periods. Delivery has been underpinned by strong partnership working, enabling a locally responsive and diverse programme to be offered across the county. Through the Council's Talk Community programme, the authority has worked in collaboration with over 40 community-based providers, drawing on local assets, skills and facilities to deliver a wide range of enriching activities. These include outdoor pursuits, pottery, trampolining, parkour, drama, aerial skills, boxing and cooking, ensuring a varied offer that reflects local interests and community strengths cooking.
6. Feedback from children, young people and their families has been consistently positive and demonstrates the impact of providing accessible, high-quality holiday provision. Children have remained engaged in physical activity throughout holiday periods, had access to healthy meals, developed new friendships and reported enjoying a wide range of activities. The feedback also highlights the value of delivering provision in familiar, community-based settings, supporting confidence, social connection and sustained engagement over the school holidays.
7. The DfE have allowed up to 15% of the grant to be allocated to children and young people that are not eligible for free school meals but are considered vulnerable and meet an eligibility criteria. The eligibility criteria is determined by consultation with other local authorities and finalised with input from the steering group. We ask that professionals working with children and young people, such as schools, family support workers and community groups use their discretion to identify the children that meet the criteria.
8. A panel of council officers has been established to assess the community provider applications against the set criteria above (see point 4) and providers who have been successful will be awarded a grant to deliver the programme.
9. Families can access and book the activities via an online booking portal. This system provides an overview of the activity, date, time, location and offer. Families unable to access the online booking system can be supported to do this with through the pastoral support within their child's school. An engagement plan is developed to ensure all eligible families are aware and

informed of the programme, this is via school communication, leaflets and social media. The activities are allocated on booking platform and families are able to access the entitled hours.

10. The attached Appendix A provides a comparison of Herefordshire with other small counties that share similar characteristics. The benchmarking document presents 2024/25 data and illustrates how our county's performance aligns with that of our statistical neighbours.

Community impact

11. The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme is coordinated by the Council's Talk Community team and delivered using a strengths-based approach, working closely with community settings across Herefordshire. Over the past four years, the programme has strengthened local partnerships and contributed to the development of a more connected community infrastructure. Many holiday activity providers delivering HAF provision actively engage with Talk Community beyond the programme itself. Several have gone on to become Talk Community Champions or Hubs, and all providers are supported to use the Talk Community Directory to signpost families to wider community services and share information consistently. By being delivered through the Talk Community approach, the programme strengthens collaborative working between community organisations and the Council and ensures that holiday provision contributes to wider, longer-term community connection and resilience.
12. Over the past four years, Talk Community has worked with a wide range of providers and organisations, including voluntary and community sector groups, schools and private organisations. This partnership-based approach has extended the reach of the Holiday Activities and Food Programme and supported engagement with a broader cross-section of the local population.
13. Care-experienced children and young people of school age who are eligible for benefit-related free school meals will qualify for the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme. Where a care-experienced child or young person is not eligible for free school meals, but meets locally agreed discretionary criteria, access to the programme may be agreed following a referral. Referrals may be submitted by the child or young person's social worker, support worker or school.

Environmental impact

14. The proposal ~~seeks~~ aligns to the following success measures in the Council Plan.
 - a) The development of this programme and its principles is based on providing activities across the county to reduce travel and offer a local service to families and children. The aim is to increase the number of short-distance trips made by sustainable modes of travel, walking, cycling, or public transport. Where this isn't possible, consideration will be given to alternative travel options, such as minibuses and other suitable solutions.
 - b) The programme will work with local food providers to ensure they are considerate of the environment. HAF providers are encouraged to use refillable drinking vessels, recycle waste and liaise with local farmers and supermarkets to make use of any food surplus.
 - c) HAF providers are encouraged to make use of local green space in Herefordshire for children to access physical activities.

Equality duty

15. The Department for Education (DfE) stipulates that the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme is available to all school-aged children in receipt of benefits-related free school meals. In addition, the DfE has approved that up to 15% of the grant may be used to support vulnerable children who meet eligibility criteria set by the local authority. These criteria have been developed through consultation with other local authorities and finalised with input from the programme's steering group.
16. Due to the potential impact of this decision being low, a full Equality Impact Assessment is not required. However, the following equality considerations should be taken into account when making a decision about this activity/project:
- Providers will be required to specify the age range of children they can accommodate, taking into account their facilities, staff training, and qualifications.
 - Providers will be required to make appropriate provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Providers must also indicate whether they are able to offer more specialised support for children and young people who require one-to-one staffing.

Resource implications

17. All aspects of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme delivery, including administration, promotion and staffing are covered by the DfE grant. The DfE have included 7.5% within the grant to Herefordshire to cover the administration costs of the programme. This will contribute towards the salary for a Community Development Support Officer and as well as wider administration and marketing costs.
18. The DfE has confirmed that HAF grant funding will continue until March 2029.

Revenue or Capital cost of project (indicate R or C)	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	Future Years	Total
Revenue Expenditure	£481,240	£000	£000	£000	£481,240
TOTAL	£481,240				£481,240

Funding streams (indicate whether base budget / external / grant / capital borrowing)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	Future Years	Total
DfE grant – funding for first year of 3-year grant. Years 2 and 3 allocations to follow annually.	£481,240	£000	£000	£000	£481,240
TOTAL					

Revenue budget implications	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	Future Years	Total
	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000
Net nil budget impact – expenditure limited to the amount of the grant allocation					
TOTAL					£0

Legal implications

19. There are no specific legal implications other than those considered in other parts of this report.

Risk management

20. Consideration to the risks / opportunities to the council if the recommendation(s) are agreed and how these will be managed; and the risks / opportunities to the council if the recommendation(s) are declined and how these will be managed are set out in the table below;

<p>Risk / opportunity:- Community provision – if there is insufficient groups to deliver the requirements of a programme then the scheme might not meet its potential.</p>	<p>Mitigation Demand has previously been met, and ongoing work continues to ensure there are sufficient providers across the county. Providers are also encouraged to offer flexibility should additional capacity be required.</p>
<p>Poor uptake of the programme by eligible children, resulting in children missing out on opportunities and positive impact.</p>	<p>Targeted school communications through Herefordshire Council, partnerships with community groups, and outreach via Talk Community channels.</p>
<p>The programme is oversubscribed and the DfE grant does not cover the full costings of the programme.</p>	<p>Work closely with providers to maximise efficiency. Monitor take-up trends throughout the year to identify any potential shortfall early and adjust allocation strategies accordingly.</p>

21. The identified risks will be managed at the directorate level within the Community Wellbeing risk register. Regular monitoring and mitigation strategies will be implemented to ensure the successful delivery of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme within the allocated funding

Consultees

22. We have consulted with Councillor Ivan Powell, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People; Councillor Carole Gandy, Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing, Hilary Hall, Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing, Rachel Sanders, Director of Finance and Zoe Clifford, Director of Public Health.

Appendices

Appendix A - Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme – Benchmarking for Herefordshire – reach, average days, spend on provision/ number of places and % of booked places unattended in comparison to statistical neighbours.

Background papers

None identified

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.