

Walking Into Nothing

The Hidden Cost of the School
Holidays for Families

**The
Children's
Society**

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Foreword

Mark Russell OBE, CEO of The Children's Society

For many families, the end of term does not mark the beginning of a break, but the start of a gap. As one young person told us, “... **as soon as you leave the school gates on the last day of term, you just know that you're like walking into nothing for either two weeks or six weeks or whatever it is.**” That phrase has stayed with me, and it captures exactly why this report matters.

Schools are a vital part of children's lives, not only as places of learning but as sources of stability, opportunity and even sustenance. When the school gates close, that support often falls away. For too many families, what follows is not rest but a period of increased pressure and difficult choices.

There has been important progress in recent years. The expansion of free school meals to all children in families receiving Universal Credit and continued investment in the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme are welcome steps forward. But as this report shows, they do not yet go far enough. School holidays remain a critical and often overlooked pressure point where existing inequalities are intensified.

The findings set out here are stark. Families across the UK are struggling to manage the additional costs that come with school holidays, with many lacking confidence in their ability to afford even the next break. Too often, parents are forced to rely on savings, take on debt, or use a food bank. This is not a sustainable or acceptable position for any family.

At the same time, gaps in support mean too many children are missing out on opportunities. While free school meals eligibility is widening, holiday provision has not kept pace. As a result, **we estimate that around 1.3 million children in households receiving Universal Credit could be left without access to vital holiday support.** Through local authority data, we also see clear gaps in existing provision, particularly for older children and teenagers, whose needs are too often overlooked.

Activities, enrichment and time to connect with others are not luxuries. They are essential to children's wellbeing, confidence and development. One young person spoke about the anxiety of returning to school with nothing to share about their holidays, while their peers spoke about exciting days out and new experiences. We can, and must, do better than this.

This is why we are calling on government to act: to align eligibility for HAF with expanded free school meals, and to strengthen provision for teenagers so they have access to suitable, affordable and meaningful activities and experiences.

I am grateful to everyone who contributed to this report, particularly the young people and parents who shared their experiences. Their voices must be at the centre of how we respond.

We have a clear opportunity to act. No child should leave the school gates at the end of term and feel they are walking into nothing.

Mark Russell OBE
CEO, The Children's Society

Introduction

“I think it's so embedded in school that it [school holidays] was such a happy time. But for some people, going back to school is a good thing. I remember free school meals and stuff, it's when I sort of got the most options with food and the better food. So, for me, I quite liked school more than I liked the holidays. Obviously it's different for everyone, but it's an important thing to think about.”^a

In June 2025, the government expanded free school meals to children in all families in receipt of Universal Credit, starting in September 2026, in a welcome move for which The Children's Society had long fought.^{b, 1, 2} Two months later, in August 2025, the government announced a further £600 million of funding for the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme until April 2029. These measures, which form part of the government's Child Poverty Strategy, are important steps in providing support to low-income families. However, many families continue to feel the strain.

Funding for local youth services has fallen dramatically in recent years – according to the latest report from The Children's Services Funding Alliance (of which The Children's Society is a part) – spending on services for young people has fallen by around 73% since 2020/21 from £1.5bn to £0.4bn.³ There is an acute lack of safe, accessible spaces for children and teenagers in particular. At the same time, the ongoing cost of living crisis continues to place pressure on family finances. These challenges are especially felt during school holidays, when the support structures provided by schools, including activities, clubs and free school meals (for eligible families) are removed. As one young person described to us, leaving school for the holidays can feel like “walking into nothing” for many children.

The school holidays represent a key pressure point for families. Many families face the combined challenge of meeting increased food costs, finding affordable and age-appropriate activities, and balancing work without sufficient childcare. For some, this leads to financial strain; for others, it means children miss out on opportunities for enrichment and social participation, with lasting impacts on their confidence and wellbeing.

What is widely considered a time for children to rest, spend time with family and make memories is sadly a time of mounting financial pressure for hard-working families, with little outlet or support for children. These pressures are heightened for low-income families or those receiving Universal Credit, though our research shows that many families not in receipt of benefits are also struggling to afford the costs associated with school holidays.

^a A young person with whom The Children's Society consulted in January 2026.

^b The Children's Society had long called for previously restrictive income thresholds to be removed to enable free school meals access for children in low-income families, demonstrating how they both denied many children in need of this vital lifeline and could act as a work disincentive.

A consistent finding across this report is the lack of suitable, accessible and affordable provision for teenagers and older children^c – an issue highlighted by both the parents^d and young people whom we consulted.

The HAF Programme has, since 2020, played a vital role in addressing these challenges by providing access to food and activities during the holidays to low-income families. Northumbria University's Healthy Living Lab has undertaken extensive research relating to HAF, highlighting its crucial role in helping disadvantaged young people. However, access remains uneven, particularly for older children.^{e, 4} Our research in this report shows that HAF is under-accessed overall and disproportionately reaches younger children, with older children and teenagers significantly less likely to benefit.

While the recent extension of the programme to April 2029 is welcome, eligibility remains tied to the previous free school meals threshold (annual family income of £7,400 or less after tax and excluding any benefits). This creates a two-tier system in which, from September 2026, all children in households receiving Universal Credit will be eligible for free school meals but many will remain ineligible for holiday support.^f Comparing the number of children eligible for free school meals in 2024/25 (excluding nurseries) with the total number of school age children in households receiving Universal Credit (in November 2025), **we estimate that around 1.3 million children could be missing out on HAF support in the school holidays from September, or about 39% of all school-age children in households in receipt of Universal Credit.**^{5, 6}

As the young people and parents that we spoke to for this report attest, the school holidays can present multiple financial challenges for ordinary families, be that around accessing food or activities for children, that are exacerbated for low-income families.⁹ However, we must note that many children will face additional challenges that are not financial or income related, which are beyond the scope of this report. This includes, but is not limited to, young people struggling with their mental health,⁷ those known to social care, young carers,

^c This report defines older children as those of secondary school age, and younger children as those of primary school age.

^d Our poll specifically surveyed parents of school-aged children, so this report refers to parents, although we acknowledge that many of these issues will be faced by parents and carers of school-aged children more broadly.

^e Northumbria University's Healthy Living Lab has also co-designed a framework for 'HAF+', specifically for young people aged 11 to 16, in response to the lower engagement with existing HAF provision from this older age group.

^f The government, in their May 2026 free school meals (FSM) guidance for local authorities, have updated that, going forward, there will be two categories of benefits-based free school meals: 'targeted FSM', which continues to be based on the existing threshold, covering pupils who are in households in receipt of Universal Credit with annual household earnings of £7,400 or less, and 'expanded FSM', a new category covering pupils who do not qualify for targeted FSM but who are in households receiving Universal Credit.¹⁸

⁹ This report refers to families in receipt of Universal Credit or other income-related benefits, rather than a household income threshold.

children and families subject to immigration control,^{h, 8} and those at risk of exploitation or abuse.^{9, 10} While this report does not explicitly capture their experiences (i.e. those we consulted may have experienced these additional challenges without our knowledge), there is scope for future work to explore the impacts of the school holidays on these children.

The government's Opportunity Mission aims to break the link between a child's background and their future prospects by tackling child poverty, which continues to limit opportunities and life chances. Programmes such as Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) provide a vital safety net – but they also go further, offering children access to activities, enrichment and experiences they might otherwise miss out on, making it crucial for this support to be expanded and accessible. This report examines the financial pressures families face during school holidays and sets out how government policy can go further to ensure all children have access to food, activities and support – both during term time and beyond.

^h The Children's Society works directly with children in families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and has consistently highlighted how the NRPF condition, which prevents access to welfare support based on a condition of parents' immigration status, pushes families into poverty and destitution.

Methodology

This report explores school holidays by drawing on a wealth of sources, including scoping sessions with young people, data gathered from local authorities in England via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, insights from practitioners delivering or commissioning HAF sessions, and a new UK-wide poll of 3,000 parents of school-aged children (aged 4 to 16) exploring their experiences of the February 2026 half-term. In doing so, it highlights an important area for government to focus on as part of its ongoing efforts to tackle child poverty: to ensure all children have the right support, whether that is access to food or activities and enrichment, during the school holidays.

Youth scoping session

The Children's Society held two group sessions with two different sets of young people, in December 2025 and January 2026 respectively, to scope the key themes of this report and gauge young peoples' experiences and perceptions of school holidays. The 13 young people (across two groups) were aged between 14 and 22 years and from a variety of backgrounds, including some from low-income households and who had been in receipt of free school meals. One session was held in person and the other online, both in group settings. None are supported through The Children's Society's direct services. The findings from these sessions are more likely to represent the experiences of teenagers and older children, given the participants' ages.

Parents' poll

The Children's Society commissioned Censuswide to undertake a nationally representative poll of 3,000 parents of school-aged children (aged 4 to 16) across the UK immediately after the February 2026 half-term. This survey was in the field between 25 February 2026 and 4 March 2026. Within the sample, 54% of parents reported that their eldest school-age child was of primary school age, and 46% said their eldest school-age child was of secondary school age. Where we describe the responses to our poll, the percentages have been rounded, and so may not always sum to 100%. For some questions, respondents were asked to select all options that apply, so answers again may not sum to 100%.

The questions built on the themes that emerged from consulting young people in December 2025 and January 2026, and sought to understand parents' experiences of school holidays across the country. Parents were surveyed on a range of themes, including: costs of the most recent school holiday (February half-term 2026); if they had worried about covering costs for their child and what they had done if they had struggled; how they were managing financially during the year to date; and what would help ease the burden. We asked parents to think about their eldest school-age child when answering the questions.

The sample was nationally representative for age, gender and region. Income was allowed to fall out naturally, and our results show that more than half (56%) of parents polled said that no one in their household is in receipt of income-related benefits, while around 39% had children who are eligible for free school meals. Due to the sample size, we were unable to compare groups based on ethnicity.

Local authority Freedom of Information (FOI) request data

While local authorities publish annual reports on the HAF provision in their local areas, these can vary greatly in terms of style and content. There is also no centrally published data on take-up of HAF. Therefore, to better understand the levels of engagement and take-up around the programme, we submitted FOI requests to all unitary and upper tier local authorities in England, including the City of London Corporation.

From those requests, we received responses from 82 local authorities, of which 78 provided meaningful responses on the HAF Programme. Particularly, we asked councils about: how it made assessments of the accessibility and spread of HAF across its local area and how these services are meeting local need; the number of children who accessed HAF during the 2025 summer holiday; details about the age, gender, and social care involvement of children who attended that summer provision; and a summary of the activities made available to children and young people through the programme.

School holidays in focus: what the literature tells us

School holidays can intensify existing inequalities for children and families in the UK, with significant impacts on children's wellbeing, access to activities, and families' financial security. Evidence from other charities and organisations consistently shows that, while holidays can be a positive and enriching period for some children, they present substantial challenges for others, particularly those living in low-income households.

Low-income families

Research by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in June 2025 showed how school holidays intersect with child poverty, highlighting how parents receiving income-related benefits faced significantly increased household costs – particularly for food and other basics like sunscreen, energy, childcare and activities – during the holidays. Many parents receiving income-related benefits reported being unable to afford outings, trips or structured activities, as well as small treats like an ice cream, limiting children's opportunities for socialisation and enrichment during the holidays. CPAG's findings also highlight knock-on effects for children's health and wellbeing, with parents worried about their child being picked on by others and spending more time alone because of a lack of money.¹¹

The available research strongly suggests that school holidays function as a pressure point where low incomes, inadequate benefit levels and rising living costs converge. This report builds on this growing body of evidence, bringing together a unique mix of youth, practitioner and parent voices alongside the latest local authority data.

Food insecurity and holiday hunger

A 2025 survey by The Felix Project showed that 67% of teachers in England (over 9,000 surveyed) fear at least one child in their class faces hunger during the summer holiday.¹² Free school meals play a crucial role in ensuring children from low-income households do not go hungry during term time, often giving children their only hot, nutritious meal of the day. Holiday hunger, or hunger more broadly, is not an isolated issue but rooted in poverty – namely family incomes and social security support that are not in line with rising food and living costs. And the school holidays can widen inequalities, with consequences for children's physical health, energy levels and readiness to learn and take part when they return to school.

Childcare and parental employment

“So holidays for me was ... I mean, I was one of the older ones, so I was actually the childcare. I was like babysitting ... because my mum worked over the holidays as well.”ⁱ

School holidays are an important, but under-recognised, driver of in-work poverty and economic insecurity for families with children. Research by Coram from July 2025 highlights how the significantly higher cost of holiday childcare compared with term-time provision often exceeds what many families can afford, costing more than £1,000 per child over a six-week period, with fewer places available for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).¹³ Similarly, analysis by Pregnant Then Screwed highlights the employment consequences of school holidays, especially for mothers, reinforcing labour market gender inequality. Their findings show that a substantial number of parents (mostly mothers) take unpaid leave during the summer holidays due to a lack of affordable or suitable childcare.¹⁴ All of this leads to financial strain for households and uneven access to enriching activities for children, and shapes children's experiences of holidays. Although this report does not explicitly go into childcare costs or issues, it was an underlying theme and undoubtedly a contributing factor to school holiday financial pressures for families.

ⁱ A young person with whom The Children's Society consulted in January 2026.

Not just a day out: what young people told us

“I did really enjoy the holidays because my mum did always put in a lot of effort to make them really special”^j

This section explores the main issues and experiences that young people raised regarding school holidays. While, for many young people, school holidays presented a chance to relax, spend time with family and recuperate from the school term, for others, there were concerns about a lack of activities or being bored, increased time on their phones, and falling behind on schoolwork. For some, pressures and expectations remained but without the formal support structures that school provides. Most alluded to parents feeling stretched to some degree as they juggled work, childcare and finances.

“I find it difficult to find things to do that don't cost money”^k

Universally, there was a call for more suitable, accessible and affordable (or free) activities for teenagers, and better provision for youth clubs. Having access to universal youth services potentially provides young people with vital trusted adult relationships – someone they feel safe with and who understands them.

A worrying theme was the prevalent struggles with wellbeing or mental health. Some said they didn't know where to get support during the holidays, and although school could be difficult for them for various reasons, the lead up to the holidays could also be a source of anxiety as the thought of weeks without their support network or access to trusted teachers or services loomed.^l

“I think, for a lot of young people, especially who are from low-income families, if they do struggle with their mental health or anything like that, [it's important] to have some sort of support outside of school. So important because it is literally like as soon as you leave the school gates on the last day of term,

^j A young person with whom The Children's Society consulted in January 2026.

^k A young person with whom The Children's Society consulted in December 2025.

^l Although detailed analysis into this area is beyond the remit of this report, there is scope for future work in this space. The Children's Society strongly believes that every young person should be able to identify and access at least one trusted adult of their choosing; someone they feel safe with and who understands them. These adults must be equipped with training and awareness of key issues impacting young people. This trusted adult guarantee must be monitored by young people's perspectives on this, captured in a national wellbeing measurement programme.¹⁹

you just know that you're like walking into nothing for either two weeks or six weeks or whatever it is.”^m

The below section focuses on the themes that were directly relevant to poverty or financial pressures, heavily drawing on insights from the young people from low-income households with whom we consulted. These experiences and themes subsequently shaped the questions included in the nationwide parents' poll.

Hidden costs, limited opportunities

“It's really unstable because we didn't know whether we'd be at home with my older sister or at a grandparent's house or an auntie's house or a friend's house. That's basically how our holidays went. It was more just childcare issues, rather than actually doing things ... we didn't really get to see my mum that much, so that was probably the difficult part.”

The young people shared their experiences of the school holidays while living in low-income, some single-parent, households. It is important to note that not all their experiences of school holidays were negative – many spoke of time well spent with family and in nature. However, they also shared experiences of instability and limited opportunities to broaden their horizons or venture to try new things, primarily due to financial restrictions, including hidden costs of activities, lack of transport, and parents juggling paid work and school holidays. As one young person summarised:

“I went to a school with a lot of disadvantaged young people. We used to get a booklet of like free activities that you could do over the holidays. But with stuff like that, no one really thinks about is, like, with a day out in a museum ... your food has got to be different. It's got to be transportable there. We sort of as a family relied on oven food, but we can't really bring that to the museum. And transport's expensive. That was one of the things that limited us from going to do stuff. I do think there's a lot of hidden costs in the holidays that I think can't be really fixed with just a free day out”

Transport was one of these hidden costs. For many young people, especially those in rural areas, the availability and cost of transport was a barrier to accessing activities, even if free, in their areas. National measures such as the government's announcement that they will give children free bus travel throughout August 2026 are positive step to address this, as are policies in certain local and combined authorities to provide cheap or free travel for children.¹⁵ The spread of HAF in more rural communities was also discussed – especially

^m All the remaining quotes in this section of the report are from young people with whom The Children's Society consulted in January 2026.

as the time and cost of return journeys, especially with multiple children, in one family outweighed incentives to attend. Some of the young people remembered 'free bus days' put on by their councils, which enabled them to have days out in town, as good practice.

"And then the other part of it would be like also like accessibility and, OK, you put a really good thing on, but can people get there? Like is there childcare? Are you covering the bus tickets?"

Poignantly, some of the young people reflected on a common experience of writing essays about their holidays after returning to school. While their peers often wrote of foreign travel or elaborate days out and new experiences, the young people spoke of their shame and anxiety in disclosing how their holidays had been spent with far fewer activities, enrichment and, in some cases, food.

"For me, the parts of the school holiday that I actually used to get really stressed about, and me and my brother would always talk about, was the fact that when you went back both in primary and also for a lot of secondary, you'd have to write about what you did over the summer holidays, and I remember for some reason I just found that really, really upsetting. I think it was because I was quite academic and I always wanted to do really well. But then I was like, how do I actually write about something that actually wasn't that fun?"

The stigma and embarrassment they describe highlights the importance of levelling the playing field when it comes to the school holidays – all children deserve to have new experiences and access to a healthy meal, regardless of family income. Failing to support these children to have these universal experiences, and creating an even bigger divide between them and their peers, can hugely impact their sense of self and wellbeing, as described by one of the young people:

"When talking about people who are from lower income backgrounds, or something like that, people kind of think that oh, they can't afford food or maybe they can't afford a laptop to do schoolwork on, which is true. But I think those smaller nuances – about how it makes you feel and how it impacts your social interactions, your self-esteem – isn't really thought about. And obviously those big issues about food poverty, period poverty, or lack of access to technology are important. But then the little things in between could be thought about more, because they're important too, because it kind of makes you feel more human and makes you feel a bit more like a person."

HAF and the suitability of activities

“I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but is it suitable for teenagers? Because why would a teenager choose to leave home and not be on their phone to go sit and look at a painting that isn't remotely related to them?”

A key discussion point with the young people from lower-income backgrounds was around suitability of free activities that were available for older children and ways to attract them. Advertising was a key point, which was also raised by a HAF commissioner with whom we spoke as part of this work, particularly ensuring that posters, fliers and other materials were not aimed solely at very young children or simply promoting ‘arts and crafts’.

Some of the young people shared their own experience of attending HAF or local youth clubs providing a similar service prior to the HAF rollout in their areas, sharing good practice. They stressed the importance of incentivising young people to attend. For example one young person described a programme where they designed a social action campaign, which engaged older children. They received an AQA accreditationⁿ as part of this and went go-karting, which they had never done before. The programme advertised that the price of a bus ticket would be covered, and young siblings could come along, allowing the older children who would otherwise care for their siblings to attend and do something for themselves. The best programmes also included other types of enrichment and allowed them to broaden their horizons. One young person said:

“I even remember so vividly, they had like a Portuguese local mum and dad who would come cook for the club. For someone like me who literally had never tried anything but like turkey dinosaurs for 14 years of my life, the confidence it gave us. You would be so surprised. It wasn't the days out at a museum that gave us confidence, it was trying a new food.”

For children who aren't eligible for or haven't attended HAF or similar programmes, the lack of activities and age-appropriate, safe spaces was a key concern. They spoke about how the play areas in the local parks were only for under 14s, leaving teenagers without safe spaces for exercise, play or seeing their friends. Some said the lack of activities led to increased time playing or scrolling on their phones, which in turn affected their wellbeing.

“Which is why I'm such a big supporter of the HAF Programme and stuff like that, because it genuinely does, even if it's for a few weeks, completely change your summer, and you've actually got something fun to talk about when you get back.”

ⁿ AQA is one of the main exam awarding bodies in the UK. The young person was more broadly referring to the benefits of gaining formal credits towards their education or vocational training as part of a HAF offer.

Delivering HAF: insights from The Children's Society

The Children's Society has, since 2025, run a Holiday Activities and Food Programme in the Bedfordshire area. We spoke to those running the service about their programme, including the challenges and on-the-ground realities.

This programme successfully attracts a range of ages, mostly 14 to 16-year-olds, but has generally had more boys than girls attending. A key part of planning the next delivery period is therefore around attracting more girls to the service.

Budgeting and costs are a key challenge, with the allocated HAF funding of around £22 per child per day (£19 on activities and £3 for food) also having to cover running costs such as staffing, resources and premises. Ensuring premises have food hygiene certificates and can provide hot food adds extra pressure on budgets. Providers of HAF have to absorb these additional costs, either through operating at a loss or subsidising with other assets, e.g. having access to their own buildings with suitable facilities.

Practitioners stressed the importance of consulting young people about what they want to do, and getting external providers to fill those gaps where feasible. They also rely on strong local partnerships with other voluntary and community organisations to ensure the programme best meets the needs of local children.

Popular activities have been cooking, music production, and sports such as basketball and football. Crucially, the programme provides young people with enrichment and opportunities to broaden their horizons, such as visits to local safari parks or through partnerships with national animal and nature charities.

The holiday squeeze: what parents told us

Key findings from the parents' poll

Overall, the poll highlighted that parents are facing significant financial pressures – around a fifth (21%) of parents were already finding the year financially difficult (by early March 2026)^o – and the school holidays exacerbate this strain, with **57% of parents agreeing that school holidays were financially stressful**. Rising costs and insufficient provision of suitable activities are causing parents to worry, dip into savings or borrow money short term, with implications on their longer-term financial security. Parents who had found it difficult to cover costs during the holidays also told us how they had skipped a meal themselves or even used a food bank.^{p, 16}

Worryingly, this appears to be getting worse not better, with around **64% of parents saying costs of the school holidays were higher this year than last year**.^q Indeed, around 2 in 5 parents (41%) surveyed said they did not feel confident about being able to afford the overall costs of the next school holiday^r – for parents in receipt of Universal Credit, this was higher at 53%.^s

1 in 10 (10%) parents said that, during the most recent school holiday (February 2026 half-term), when they found it difficult to cover costs for their eldest child, they used a food bank.

This is more than double the national rate of general foodbank use of 3.8%.

Around **2 in 5 (41%)** parents said that, looking ahead to the next school holiday, they do not feel confident about being able to afford the overall associated costs (food, activities, childcare, essentials, transport, other) for their eldest school-age child.

38% of parents said that more free, local activities for teenagers would make the most difference to their family managing financially in the school holidays.

Almost two thirds (**65%**) of parents said they are worried about the cost of their child's food during the school holidays.

This was higher for parents on income-related benefits, with **77%** worried about the cost of their child's food during the school holidays.

^o This figure includes 9% who are finding it very difficult and 13% who are finding it quite difficult.

^p 1 in 10 parents surveyed said they used a food bank during February 2026 half term when they found it difficult to cover costs for their eldest child (n=2,077). In 2024/25, for the UK population as a whole, 3.8% of individuals lived in a household that had accessed a food bank in the previous 12 months. Of all UK children, 6.6% lived in households that had accessed a food bank in the previous 12 months, of all UK working-age adults this was a rate of 3.6%, and of all UK pensioners this was a rate of 0.9%.

^q Includes 19% who said the costs were much higher and 44% who said the costs were slightly higher.

^r Around 2 in 5 (41%) parents said that, looking ahead to the next school holiday, they do not feel confident about being able to afford the overall associated costs (food, activities, childcare, essentials, transport, other) for their eldest school-age child. This includes 12% who said they were not at all confident and 29% who said they were not very confident. This means that 1,244 said they were not confident, where n=3,000.

^s This includes 19% who are not at all confident and 34% who are not very confident. This means that 575 parents in receipt of Universal Credit said they were not confident, where n=1,086.

Costs of school holidays

We asked parents to estimate how much they had spent on food and drink for their eldest school-age child over the February half-term, i.e. a one-week period. On average, parents estimated that, over the course of the February half-term, they spent £50 on food and drink for their child. For parents of secondary school children, this was on average £52, whereas of primary school children, it was an average of £48.

Comparing this to the amount they spend on food and drink for their child in term time, while 3 in 10 parents (30%) said this amount was about the same, for almost 3 in 5 parents (58%) surveyed, this amount was higher in the school holidays.^t

We also asked parents about how much they had spent on other costs, such as activities, childcare, transport and essentials other than food, for their eldest school-age child during the February half-term. On average, parents of primary school children said they spent an estimated £93 on these other costs for their child, while parents of secondary school children estimate they spent £89 over the holiday.^u

As expected, the school holidays can increase costs for families, specifically because of the gap in school-based provision of meals and structured activities. The top three things parents found difficult to cover the cost of for their child during the February half-term were:



^t This includes 19% for whom it was much higher and 39% for whom it was slightly higher.

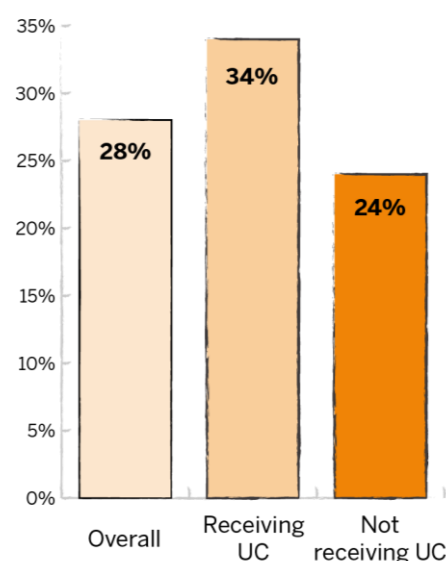
^u Examples of other costs included activities, childcare, transport and essentials other than food. For parents of primary school children, n=1,613, and for parents of secondary school children, n=1,387.

The impacts for families receiving Universal Credit (UC) were even more acutely felt. For these families, over 3 in 5 (63%) said that, thinking about the most recent school holiday, they found it difficult to cover the cost of activities and days out for their eldest school-age child. This is compared to half (50%) of parents who aren't receiving UC. Similarly, nearly half (47%) of parents who are receiving UC said that, thinking about the most recent school holiday, they found it difficult to cover the cost of food and drink, compared to just over 3 in 10 (31%) parents who aren't receiving UC.^v

Financial struggles and actions

Worryingly, for those parents who said they were struggling to cover these costs, many described that they had done so persistently. Almost 3 in 10 (28%) parents said they struggled to cover those costs during this most recent school holiday on most days, with 43% saying they struggled on more than one day. Again, parents receiving UC were more likely to be struggling more persistently, with around a third (34%) of parents receiving UC saying they struggled to cover those costs on most days during the February half-term, compared to just under a quarter (24%) of those who aren't receiving UC.^w

Proportion of parents who struggled to cover costs 'on most days' (February 2026 half-term)



Despite a greater proportion of families in receipt of UC reporting that they were finding it difficult to cover some of these key school holiday costs, and being more likely to struggle persistently throughout the holidays, many will not be able to access support from the HAF Programme. This is because the government is creating a two-tier system where children in households receiving UC with annual household earnings of £7,400 or less will be HAF eligible but those receiving UC with earnings higher than £7,400 a year, i.e. those eligible for the expanded free school meals from September 2026, will not.

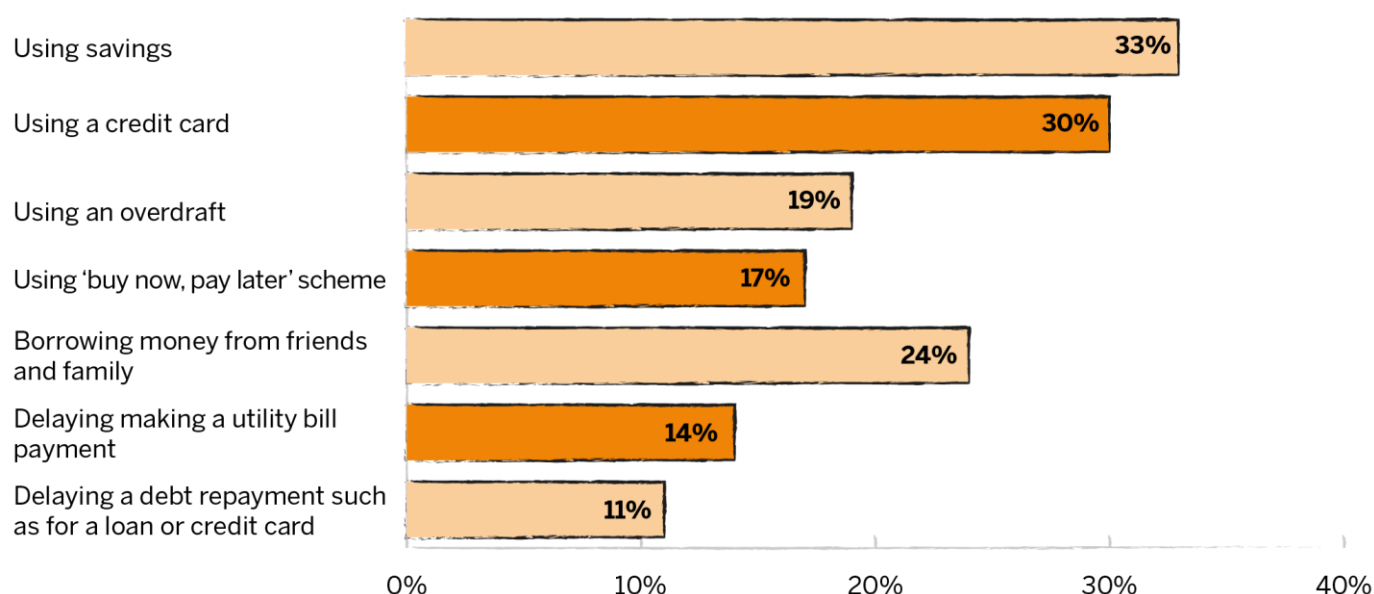
We also asked those parents who said they found it difficult to cover at least one of these key school holiday costs about the actions they might have taken as a result. This included actions to better manage financially. This saw many parents describe using their savings (33%), relying on credit products, or borrowing money from friends and family (24%). With the cost

^v For parents who are in receipt of UC, n=1,086. For parents not in receipt of UC, n=1,914.

^w Respondents to this question only included those who said they found it difficult to cover the cost of one of the following: activities and days out; food and drink; travel and transport costs; essentials (e.g. clothing, medicine, toiletries); childcare (e.g. holidays clubs, babysitters); and 'other, please specify'. For all parents who found it difficult to cover the cost of one of these things, n=2,213. Of those in this group receiving UC, n=921, and not receiving UC, n=1,292.

pressures of the school holidays increasing this year compared to last year, many of these actions could quickly become unstable for families. Smaller, but still sizable proportions also described taking more serious actions, including delaying making a utility bill payment (14%), and delaying a debt repayment such as for a loan or credit card (11%). These actions are particularly concerning as they can have a more immediate and long-term impact on families' finances.^x

Actions taken to better manage financially



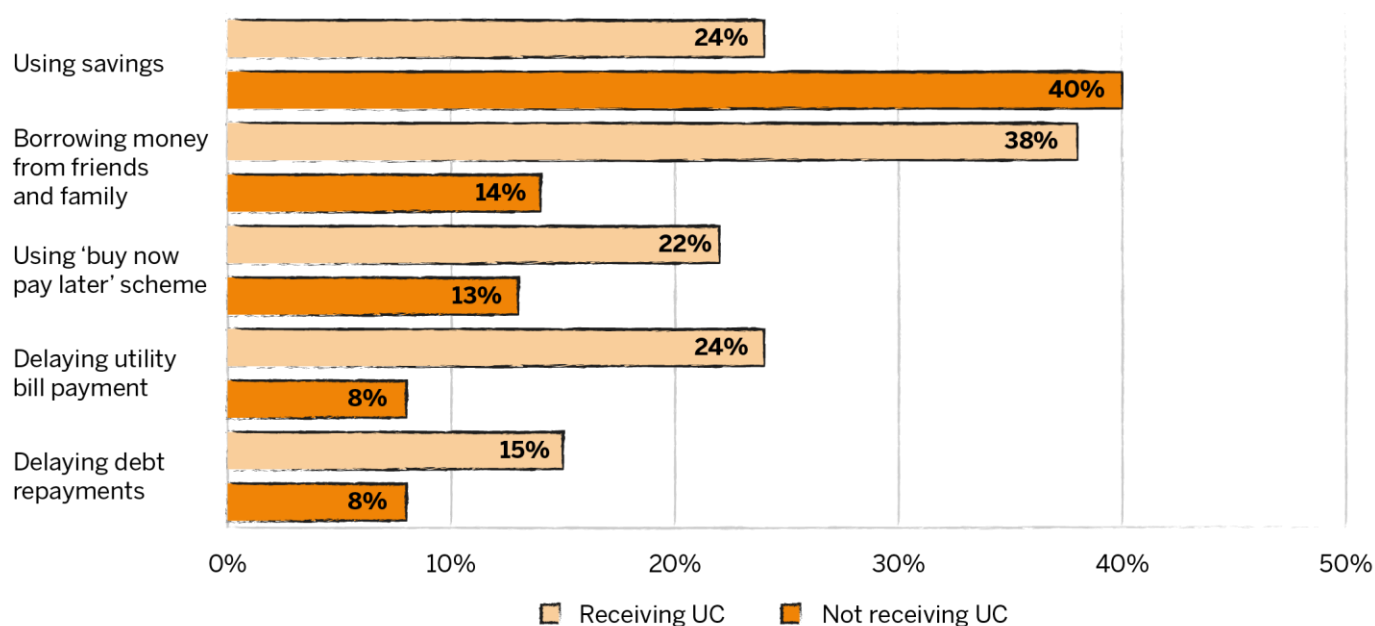
When comparing the actions taken between parents who were receiving UC and those not receiving UC, the differences in the financial options between these two groups is quite stark. For instance, families receiving UC were significantly less likely to use savings (24% compared to 40%), and much more likely to borrow money from friends and family (38% compared to 14%). In addition, families receiving UC were also more likely to use a 'buy now, pay later' scheme than those not receiving UC (22% compared to 13%).

Most concerning, families receiving UC were more likely to report having taken those more serious financial actions than those families not receiving UC. For delaying utility bill payment, this was 24% of families receiving UC compared to 8% of those not receiving UC. And, for delaying debt repayments, this was 15% receiving UC compared to 8% of those not receiving UC.^y

^x Respondents to this question, again, only included those who said they found it difficult to cover one of the key school holiday costs. For this group overall, n=2,213.

^y For these subgroups, n=921 for parents receiving UC, and n=1,292 for parents not receiving UC.

Actions taken to better manage financially, comparing families receiving and not receiving UC

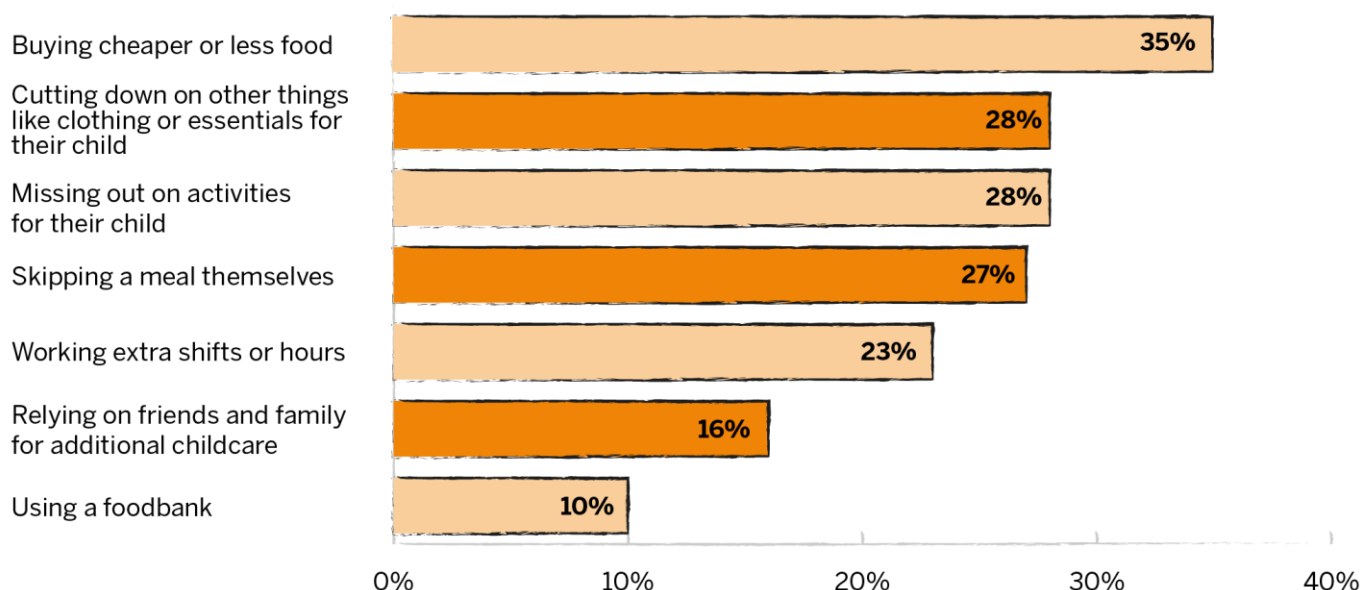


We asked parents who took these financial actions about other steps they might have also taken to try to manage costs. Parents described:

- buying cheaper or less food (35%)
- cutting down on other things like clothing or essentials for their child (28%)
- missing out on activities for their child (28%)
- skipping a meal themselves (27%)
- working extra shifts or hours (23%)
- relying on friends and family for additional childcare (16%)
- using a foodbank (10%).^z

^z Respondents to this question were those parents who took action to better manage financially when they found it difficult to cover costs for their eldest child during the February half-term, where n=2,077.

Other steps parents took to manage key school holiday costs



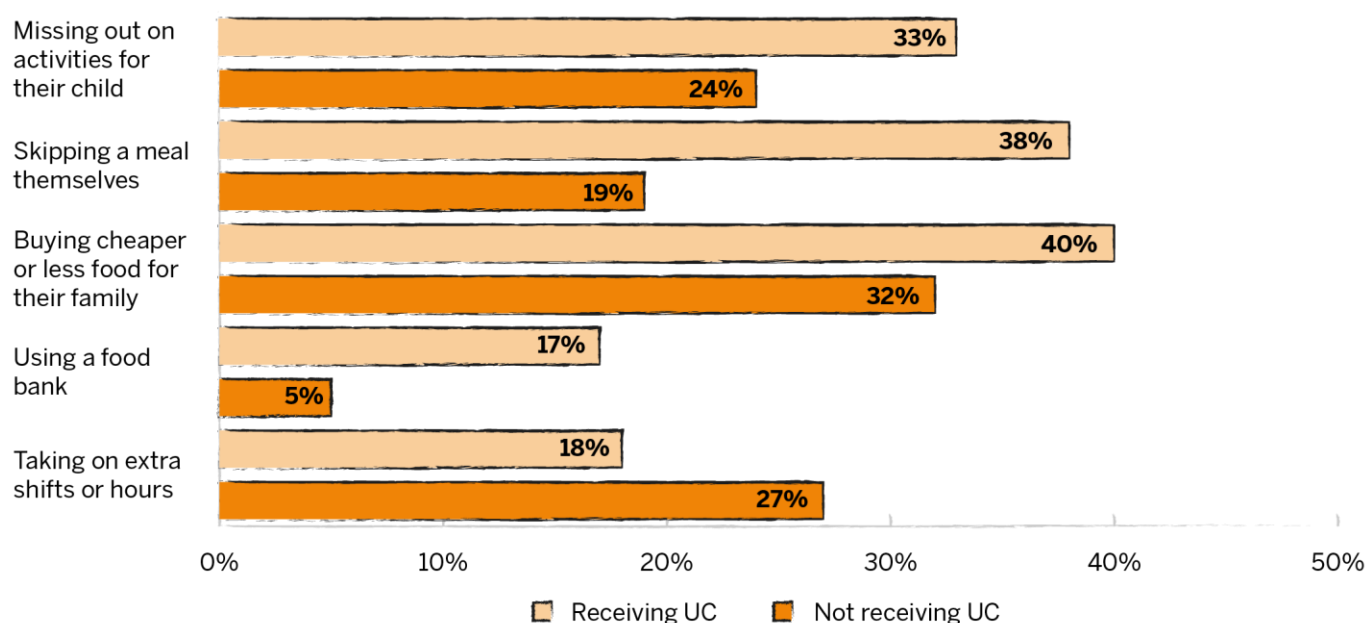
Again, comparing the responses from families receiving UC and those not receiving UC reveals important differences in the actions available to them. Families receiving UC more often reported missing out on activities for their child (33% compared to 24%), skipping a meal themselves (38% compared to 19%), and buying cheaper or less food for their family (40% compared to 32%), than those not receiving UC. Moreover, one-in-six (17%) of these families receiving UC said they used a food bank, compared to 5% who did not receive UC. Conversely, families receiving UC were less likely to say they took on extra shifts or hours than families who did not receive UC (18% compared to 27%).^{aa}

Differences between actions taken by parents receiving UC and those who are not underline the distinct challenges faced by families reliant on means-tested social security. Despite this, many will be excluded from HAF support because their household income exceeds the low eligibility threshold of £7,400 per year. As set out above, we estimate that around 39% of children in these households will not qualify for HAF support during school holidays.^{bb, 5, 6}

^{aa} For these subgroups, n=868 for parents receiving UC, and n=1,209 for parents not receiving UC.

^{bb} Comparing the number of children eligible for free school meals in 2024/25 (excluding nurseries) with the total number of school age children in households receiving Universal Credit (in November 2025), we estimate that around 1.3 million children could be missing out on HAF support in the school holidays from September 2026, or about 39% of all school-age children in households in receipt of Universal Credit.

Other steps parents took to manage key school holiday costs, comparing families receiving and not receiving UC



Not only are these cost pressures having an impact on children's opportunities, with families describing their child missing out on activities due to cost difficulties, they are also causing high levels of worry and financial stress among parents. Overall, **57% of parents agreed that they find the school holidays stressful from a financial perspective**, rising to 66% of parents receiving UC and 76% of the parents who said they were already finding this year difficult financially.^{cc}

More specifically, 77% of parents were worried about activity costs, 65% were worried about food costs, 59% were worried about transport, and 49% were worried about childcare.^{dd} For parents receiving UC, these worries seemed even more acute, with a greater proportion of parents receiving UC worrying about each of these things than parents overall.

Looking ahead

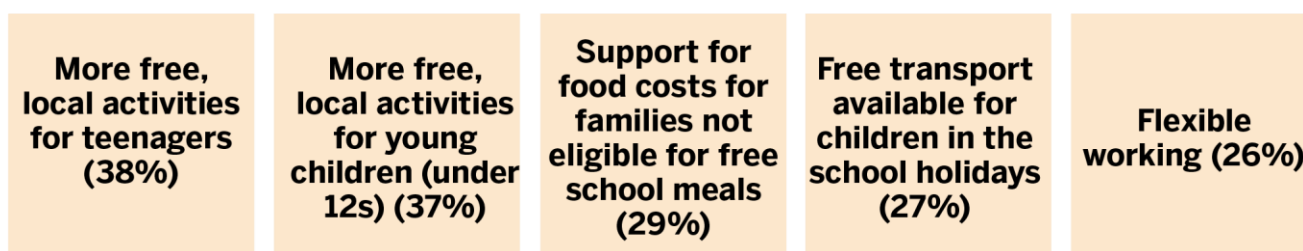
This has left parents in a precarious position, with 41% of parents saying they lacked confidence in affording the next school holidays. This rose to 53% among those receiving Universal Credit and 79% among those who said they were already struggling financially

^{cc} For parents receiving UC, n=1,086, and for parents who said they were finding the year so far difficult financially, n=643.

^{dd} These include parents who said they are a little, somewhat, or very worried about each cost.

this year.^{ee} This was compounded by 64% of parents saying that costs of the school holidays this year are higher than last year, showing worsening pressure for families.^{ff}

When asked about the measures that would make the most difference to their families managing financially in the school holidays, more free, local activities for teenagers was the top response for parents overall (38%), and especially for parents of secondary school-age children (55%). Other top measures included more free local activities for under 12s, support for food costs for families not eligible for free school meals, and free transport for children during the holidays.



With 42% of parents disagreeing that there are enough affordable or free activities for teenagers in their area, and more free, local activities for these young people emerging as the top measure to help families manage financially, the need for action on this is clear. For those families on the lowest incomes, the HAF Programme offers free activities and a healthy meal, and half (50%) of families receiving UC are aware of the programme in their local area. Our polling revealed that the challenges faced by families on low incomes, and so receiving UC, are particularly stark and acute.

However, we know that support through the HAF Programme is not available to many of these children and young people, despite the government now recognising the benefits these children would receive from a hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime while they are at school. Moreover, for children in families who are struggling, but who are not eligible for income-related benefits, there is even less support available. This is why it is important for government to ensure that those children who will become eligible for free school meals from September 2026 can also access the HAF Programme, and for local authorities to ensure there are free or low-cost activities or space genuinely available and accessible to young people during the school holidays. The next section explores local authority HAF provision, based on FOI requests sent in early 2026.

^{ee} This includes parents who said they were not very confident and not at all confident. For parents receiving UC, n=1,086, and for parents who were finding this year financially difficult, n=643.

^{ff} This includes parents who said costs were slightly and much higher this year, compared to last year.

Limited reach: what local authority data tells us

In its HAF guidance for 2026/27, the Department for Education (DfE) discusses tailoring local provision. As part of this, the guidance sets out that there should be 'good geographical spread across the local authority, with increased supply in areas with higher numbers of free school meal eligible families to maximise attendance'.¹⁷ As such, it was positive to see that the vast majority of councils, in responding to our question about how they assessed the accessibility and spread of HAF provision locally, gave a narrative that focussed on things like mapping free school meals provision, using indices of multiple deprivation data to understand where there could be a greater need for services, and using previous booking data to understand where demand was higher.

Despite the positive work many local authorities are doing to map provision, the data suggests that the HAF services may not be reaching as many children and young people as possible. Using the data local authorities gave us on the number of children who had accessed HAF in the 2025 summer holidays, we compared this to the number of children eligible for free school meals in each local authority.⁵ This

suggests that, on average, less than a third (31%) of children eligible for free school meals accessed HAF in the summer of 2025.⁹⁹ Moreover, where local authorities were able to provide data about the ages of children who attended, HAF was reaching significantly more younger children than older children. On average, 3 in 4 children (74%) who attended HAF in summer 2025 were primary school age, compared to



On average, 31% of children eligible for free school meals accessed HAF in the summer of 2025.

⁹⁹ Our FOI request asked local authorities for the number of children who attended HAF during the school summer holiday in 2025. There were 74 councils who provided a substantive response to this question. Almost all of those gave a single figure in answer to this question that we then used in our analysis. Where several councils provided more specific details on the numbers of attendees, such as also giving data on children not eligible for a free HAF place who paid to attend sessions, our analysis only used figures relating to children who attended on a free place. We compared these figures to the number of children eligible for free school meals in each local authority in 2024/25 (based on the DfE's 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' dataset for each local authority) to calculate an average 'reach' for each council area. We then calculated the average of those percentages for each individual local authority. For the purposes of this analysis, we used the 'known to be eligible for free school meals' metric (used for FSM in performance tables) for state-funded primary, secondary, special, and AP schools, and non-maintained special schools. Local authorities have discretion to use some HAF funding to provide free HAF places to children who are not eligible for free school meals but who they believe would benefit from HAF. This means the reach figure is a best estimate, as there will be some children who received a funded HAF place but were not eligible for free school meals. The median was 23% of the number of children eligible for free school meals accessing HAF.

just 1 in 4 (24%) who were secondary school age.^{hh} Fewer local authorities were able to provide data on the gender breakdown of children who attended, but from those who did, this shows, on average, an even split between girls and boys (48% and 52% respectively).ⁱⁱ

We also asked local authorities about the number of children who attended HAF in summer 2025 who had children's social care involvement. Of the 78 substantive responses we received, only 13 authorities were able to provide any data on this

group, and where this data was provided, it was often based on parental or self-declaration during the booking process. While not all children with social care involvement will be automatically entitled to access HAF, as they may not be eligible for free school meals, some councils described using the discretionary portion of HAF funding to offer support to this group. With two of the stated aims of HAF being for children to be left feeling safe and secure, and to get access to the right support services, it is concerning that many local authorities do not have or collect robust data on the numbers of children who have involvement with social care who are accessing this provision. Where children known to social care do not access HAF, or the local authority does know whether they are, this may represent not only a missed welfare opportunity, but a missed protective opportunity – particularly during a period when school's routine safeguarding role is reduced.

Finally, we asked local authorities about the types of activities that they provide to children and young people in their local areas through the HAF Programme. There was a wide range of different responses to this question, but some activities came up more frequently, particularly art, arts and crafts, sports (often football), and cooking. Other activities mentioned included dance, music, trips, and drama, among many others.



On average, 3 in 4 children who attended HAF in summer 2025 were primary school age, compared to just 1 in 4 who were secondary school age.

^{hh} This is based on averaging the proportions of primary and secondary age children who attended HAF from the 47 local authorities who were able to provide this data. Some local authorities provided data broken down by age, as opposed to school year/phase. Where this was the case, 11-year-olds were assumed to be secondary school age. The median response was 74% primary age and 24% secondary age.

ⁱⁱ This is based on averaging the proportions of girls and boys who attended HAF from the 27 local authorities who were able to provide this data. Some also provided data for children whose gender was unknown, not disclosed, or other. For the purpose of this analysis, that data was excluded. The median response was 47% girls and 53% boys.

A word cloud featuring various activities and hobbies. The most prominent words are 'sports', 'craft', and 'art', all rendered in a large, bold, orange sans-serif font. Other words in a smaller, black sans-serif font include 'music', 'dance', 'cooking', 'trips', 'game', 'forest', 'adventure', 'basketball', 'drama', 'multisports', 'coding', 'rugby', 'gymnastics', 'creative', 'boxing', 'enrichment', 'cycling', 'martial', 'climbing', 'park', 'water sports', 'stem', 'holiday', 'physical', 'performing', 'outdoor', 'play', 'skating', 'cricket', 'swimming', 'golf', 'theatre', 'tennis', and 'football'. The words are arranged in a dense, overlapping manner, with some oriented horizontally and others vertically.

Recommendations

As explored above, school holidays can intensify existing inequalities for children and families in the UK, with significant impacts on family finances and children's ability to partake in enriching, fun activities. These experiences during school holidays are critical to young people's wellbeing: they can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as deepen financial pressures. Yet, if the right resources, support and programmes are put in place, this period can be a critical time of opportunity to drastically improve young people's wellbeing. To address this, The Children's Society recommends:

- **The government should align eligibility for the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme with the expanded free school meals criteria from September 2026.** While the recent extension of the programme to March 2029 is welcome, its current eligibility rules mean many children who need this support will be excluded. HAF remains restricted to families meeting the previous free school meals annual income threshold (£7,400 or less after tax and excluding benefits), creating an arbitrary two-tier system of 'targeted' and 'expanded' free school meals recipients and potentially leaving around 1.3 million children without the vital lifeline of school holiday support. The first stated aim of the HAF Programme is to 'help eligible children eat more healthily' by providing them with 'healthy and nutritious meals', so by creating a two-tier system where some free school meal eligible children can access HAF and others can't, the DfE risks introducing more confusion into an already under-accessed but important system. HAF provides tangible, day-to-day benefits for children and families, but as the data in this report shows, it remains under-accessed. Creating further confusion around eligibility risks alienating children who need this extra support the most.
- **The government should monitor the impact of schemes such as 'Great British Summer Savings'** that offer free bus travel for children in August 2026 and the temporary reduced rate of VAT for children's meals, tickets and family attractions, with a view to expanding this provision if proven effective at relieving pressures on families during school holidays .
- **The Department for Education should publish annual, aggregated statistics for HAF take-up to support the accountability and effectiveness of the programme.** The DfE holds central data on HAF, as local authorities are required to report it following each school holiday period during which HAF is delivered. Publishing a regular, centralised data release on HAF would enable more effective scrutiny of the effectiveness of the programme, both overall and between different local areas. It could also help to facilitate the identification of areas of good practice to help improve the programme overall. As part of the data that is collected on HAF take-up, we recommend local authorities and the DfE record information about the number of

children with social care involvement who attend HAF, to help understand the kinds of support this group are accessing during the school holidays.

- **The Department for Education should strengthen HAF guidance and grant reporting requirements so that local authorities must demonstrate how they are tailoring provision for secondary age children.** HAF providers and local authorities should ensure activities and locations are tailored to teenagers and older young people. This includes a variety of age-appropriate activities and better marketing, and enrichment opportunities such as exposure to new cuisines, activities based on social action or unique experiences, or the chance to gain accreditation or course points. Where possible, young people should be consulted when planning activities to ensure greater access.
- **Beyond HAF, there is an urgent need for government to invest in safe, everyday spaces for teenagers and young people, such as youth clubs.** While the government has invested in youth-centred service models such as the Youth Futures Hubs, there is no coherent national plan or investment into how local areas can rebuild basic infrastructure that is safe, accessible and designed for teenagers on an everyday level.

Conclusion

With child poverty rates still unacceptably high across the UK, The Children's Society calls on the government to address the often-hidden crisis experienced in school holidays when the crucial safety net of school support is removed.

School holidays should not be a point at which support falls away. Yet, for too many families, they mark a period of heightened financial pressure, limited opportunities, and reduced access to the support children rely on during term time. As this report shows, while recent policy commitments within the Child Poverty Strategy are welcome, significant gaps remain, particularly in access to holiday provision and support for teenagers.

No child should leave the school gates at the end of term and feel they are “walking into nothing”. With the right action, school holidays can be a time of opportunity rather than inequality, allowing government to deliver on its ambition to break the link between a child's background and their life chances.

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**"Every child –
no matter what
age – should
have someone."**

Louise

**Our teen years should be a time to grow, explore,
and build confidence to face the future.**

But across the UK, young people's wellbeing is in crisis. Teens in Britain are the unhappiest in Europe, with too many facing overwhelming pressures on their mental health, as well as challenges like abuse and exploitation. Too often, help is only offered at crisis point.

The Children's Society meets teenagers where they are, providing early, tailored support through drop-in services that have no referrals or waiting lists. We also hold the government to account, pushing for policies that protect the next generation.

**A future of hope and happiness belongs to every teen.
Together, we're can make sure no teen faces life alone.**

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