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RESEARCH • TRAINING • EVALUATION

A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the Implementation, Delivery and Impact of HAF Plus in Gateshead in 2024

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Executive Summary

In 2024, the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University was commissioned by Gateshead Council to evaluate their Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Plus programme. This was the first year that the HAF Plus programme was rolled out across Gateshead, following a successful HAF Plus pilot programme in summer 2023 which was attended by 40 young people. In summer 2024, HAF Plus was **attended by 160 young people from across Gateshead**. Management information data showed that **2,046 individual activity days were made available via the new HAF Plus app**, which was procured for the summer 2024 programme. This evaluation of HAF Plus in Gateshead comprised of two studies. **Study 1** was qualitative, with data collected through interviews and focus groups. **Study 2** comprised of an online young person's survey and an online parents/carers survey.

The findings showed that HAF leads at Gateshead Council conceptualised the HAF Plus programme as comprising four key elements: independent travel, meal/food vouchers, health and wellbeing activities, and safeguarding. Data from across both studies shows that the HAF Plus programme was welcomed by young people and parents/carers with **77% of young people reporting that HAF Plus allowed them to try new activities, and 71% rating the range of HAF Plus activities as good to very good**.

The expansion of HAF Plus in 2024 was afforded through the development of trusted partnerships between HAF leads and deliverers and a network of community organisations, as well as arts-based, cultural, sports and leisure venues, transport, businesses, and anchor institutions. The newly procured HAF Plus app was recognised as a key facilitator in the successful expansion of the programme in 2024. This report presents a number of recommendations for future app development, including notification reminders for session attendance, real time session feedback and further information on venue locations.

All young people who participated in HAF Plus in 2024 were provided with a travel pass to access public transport services in the region, at no cost to themselves or their families, over the whole school summer holiday period. This introduction was very popular with both young people and parents/carers, as public transport could be utilised to maintain contact with friends and family, and access available assets across the North East, on any day of the week. **The majority of young people (57%) found travelling to the activities to be somewhat to very easy and the majority of parent/carers (75%) reported that it was easy for their child to use the free transport to travel to HAF Plus activities.**

In terms of food provision, young people received vouchers for a range of outlets each week, and young people were satisfied with the variety of food on offer. Around **61% of young people noted that the food provided within the HAF Plus programme was nutritious**, with **nearly 60% of young people reporting that the food offered accommodated a range of different dietary/taste preferences**. **Over 75% of parents/carers reported that it was easy for their child to access the food on offer in HAF Plus**, and **nearly 69% of parents/carers rated the food as nutritious**. However, all participant groups recognised barriers relating to the accessibility and available of food; only particular franchised outlets accepted the vouchers. Participants noted that food outlet expansion is required in future to attenuate such issues related to food accessibility.

Overall, HAF Plus was a very successful programme in 2024, perceived as being associated with a range of positive benefits for young people and their families. **Over 73% of young people were satisfied with the HAF Plus programme** - a huge endorsement from teenagers. The HAF Plus programme reduced boredom in the school holidays and provided young people with new, fun experiences and opportunities to socialise which they otherwise may not have encountered. **Nearly 75% of young people reported that HAF Plus provided them with opportunities to meet up with friends and to make new friends** and this was the highest ranked HAF Plus attribute in the young person's survey, showing that socialisation is a priority for young people. All participant groups perceived HAF Plus to benefit families financially, with HAF leads estimating **an approximate saving of £400 per child** if they took part in multiple activities, and utilised their travel pass across the region, during summer 2024.

We have provided a number of recommendations to further improve the uptake, effectiveness and impact of HAF Plus throughout the report. The main recommendation is to continue to invest in the trailblazer HAF Plus programme, which was co-designed, supported, developed, and assessed by young people who live in Gateshead. An example of youth voice at its very best.

Acknowledgements

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1. Background

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme was introduced by the UK government in 2018 to support disadvantaged children during the school holidays by providing healthy meals and enriching activities to school-aged children, aged between 5-16-years old, across England. Following successful pilots between 2018 and 2020, in 2021 the HAF programme was rolled out to all 153 higher-tier local authorities alongside £200m p.a. funding from the Department for Education (DfE). Overall HAF has shown positive outcomes for attendees and deliverers (for a review, see Long, Defeyter & Stretesky, 2022) and provided vital support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Academics have undertaken several evaluations of local authority HAF programmes, which all show positive findings, although some notable concerns include the eligibility criteria, stigma, non-attendance and whether all food served as part of HAF adheres to School Food Standards (McSweeney et al., 2025). An evaluation of the HAF programme, commissioned by the DfE (Cox et al., 2022) showed that HAF has been relatively successful in terms of uptake and has delivered a range of positive outcomes for children. However, the evaluation reported that most attendees were of primary school age (5–11-year-olds) (76%), despite the programme being for 5–16-year-olds. During 2021, Professor Defeyter, Director of the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University consulted with nearly 500 young people from across England, and it became apparent that whilst the HAF programme provides a very good offer for primary school aged children and their families, the current HAF programme does not fully address the needs of 11–16 year olds. We know that children's needs and young people's needs differ as they develop and mature, and that supporting development across the first 8,000 days of life is important to drive human and economic capital. After all, we already cater for different chronological age groups and stages of development within our state-funded school system. The findings from the consultation showed that it was evident that many young people in the 11-16 age group are either a) not aware of HAF or, and perhaps slightly more worrying, b) aware of HAF but choosing not to attend. These findings suggest that the way we in which we communicate the HAF programme to young people is important; but they will only choose to register and attend the HAF programme if it meets their needs. It is also worth noting that young people are often spoken about as a collective but, in reality, young people are a heterogeneous group with different values, cultures, needs and wants. Thus, co-designing for 'others' was a key consideration in the HAF Plus co-design workshops that is briefly explained in the following text.

To better understand the low uptake of HAF for young people between the ages of 11-16 years of age, the Healthy Living Lab partnered with four different local authorities,

their local HAF leads, and key stakeholders who have extensive expertise in the implementation and delivery of HAF or similar programmes, to collaborate on a project that was centred around the voices of young people. As each local area had significantly different contexts related to its demographics, geography, access (i.e. transportation) and assets, it was important that the project focused on identifying local needs that offer a practical solution whilst also allowing the team to use the outcomes to inform the national HAF policy (Yee, Spencer & Defeyter, 2024).

In 2022-2023, we ran co-design workshops to develop a series of blueprints for a teenage HAF programme. The project involved working with Gateshead Council, Northumberland County Council, Birmingham City Council, & the Borough of Brent, alongside StreetGames and the Mayor's Fund for London, to design more appropriate Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) and Kitchen Social programmes for young people. This had two aims: a) to identify suitable place-based HAF programmes aimed at young people that can be implemented by the local authorities and partners (framed as HAF Plus), and b) to propose a HAF Plus framework that can be used to inform the existing national HAF policy. Further information on our HAF and HAF Plus research and projects can be found at [Healthy Living Lab | Northumbria University](#).

In addition to co-designing local blueprints, we also co-designed a National HAF Plus Framework in which we identified a number of aspects that were deemed important for policy makers at the national level. Two of these were: a) conduct research evaluations on the implementation and outcomes of HAF Plus, and b) ensure youth voice is embedded within and across the programme and included in evaluations (see Figure 1).

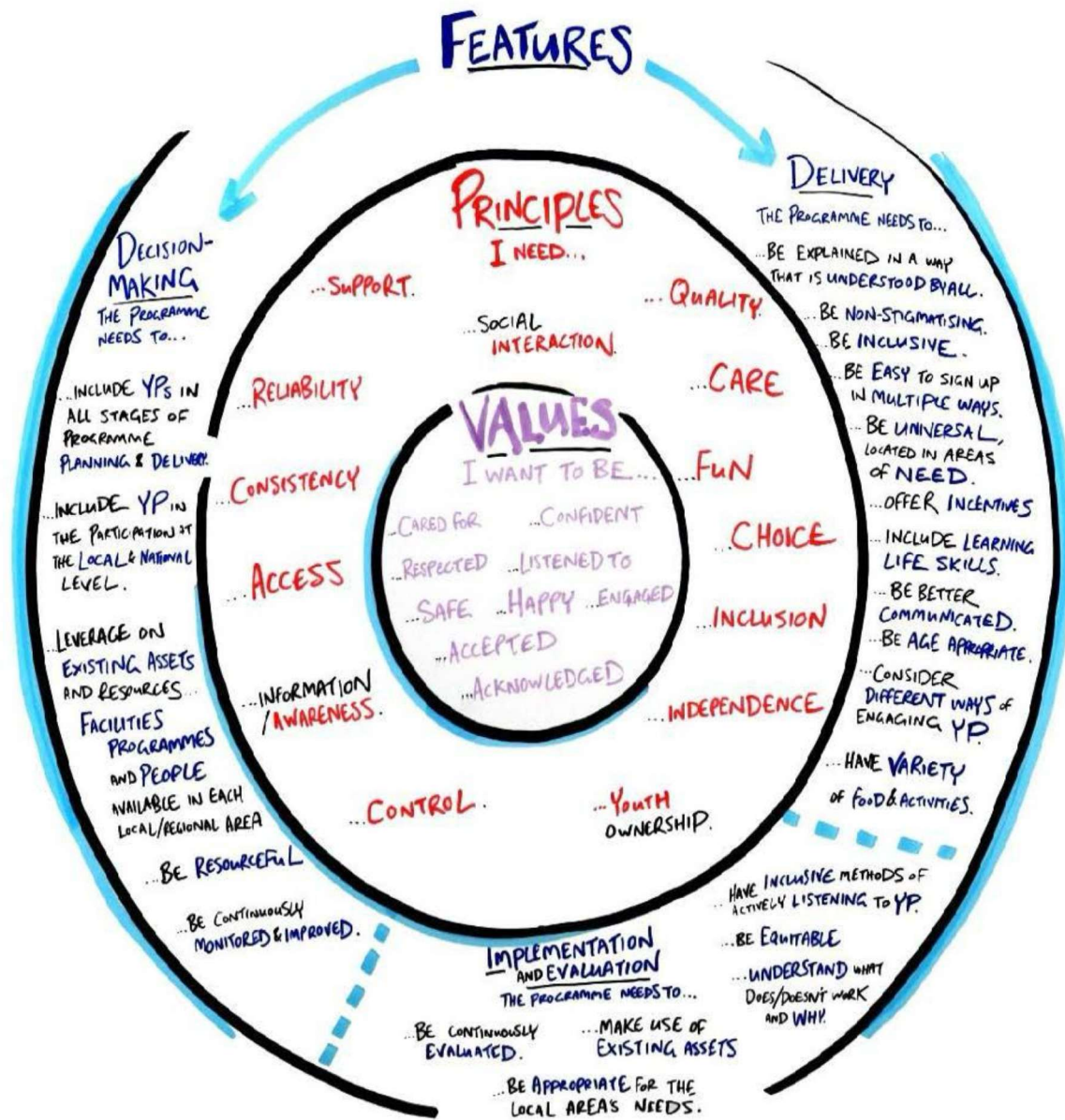


Figure 1. The consolidated HAF Plus national framework.

All the local authorities and organisations that participated in the design workshops in 2022 have implemented HAF Plus frameworks across their local authorities and HAF Plus is spreading rapidly across England. In 2023-2024, the Healthy Living Lab was offered the opportunity of evaluating the implementation of HAF Plus across a number of these local authorities. For the current paper, the evaluation of HAF Plus in Gateshead will be reported. The current paper is informed by the outcomes of the design workshops that took place in 2022. Figure 2 shows the co-designed Gateshead HAF Plus framework developed during the co-design workshops in 2022 and provides our starting point to

working with young people and stakeholders to co-develop the research questions, design and methods.

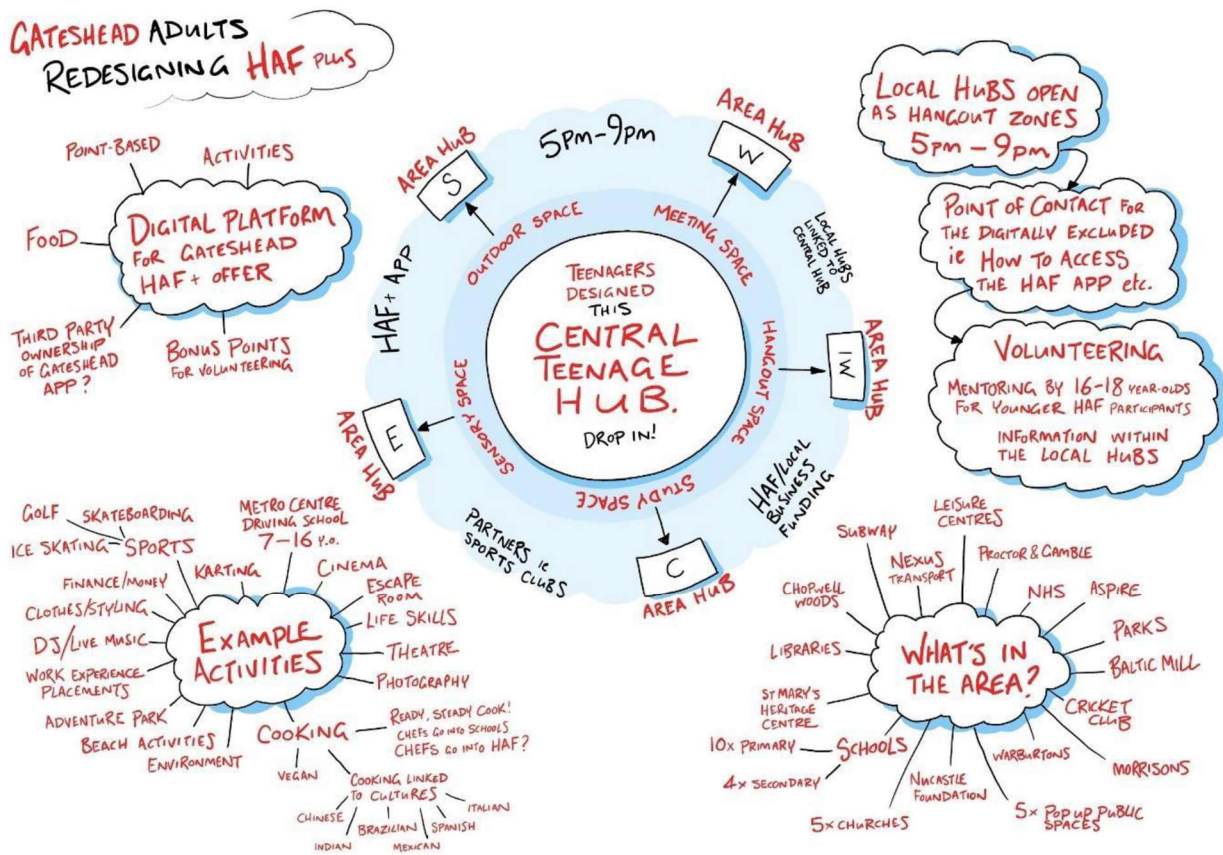


Figure 2. Co-produced HAF Plus programme for Gateshead Council

The Gateshead HAF Plus evaluation for 2024 was conducted across two separate studies. Study 1 was a qualitative evaluation through collecting the views of HAF Plus leads at Gateshead Council, delivery partners and young people who were involved with the programme in 2024. Study 2 comprised of surveys conducted with young people and parents/carers. Both studies are discussed in this report and, overall, aimed obtain the views and experiences of HAF Plus leads, deliverers, young people and parents/carers regarding the planning, implementation, delivery and impact of the Gateshead HAF Plus programme in 2024.

2. Study 1 (Qualitative)

Methods

Design

A qualitative design was employed, with semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with HAF Plus leads at local authority level, HAF Plus delivery partners and young people who took part in the HAF Plus programme in 2024. With support from researchers in the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) at Gateshead Council, separate interview and focus group schedules were developed to guide the conversations with participants in all groups.

Participants

The researcher shared information about the evaluation with two Gateshead Council HAF Plus leads, who subsequently provided information about the research to all Gateshead HAF Plus delivery partners. As such, the sampling framework consisted of all the HAF Plus leads within Gateshead Council and all delivery partners involved with HAF Plus in Gateshead in 2024.

HAF Plus leads ($n=2$) and HAF Plus delivery partners ($n=8$) who expressed an interest in being involved in the evaluation were then contacted by the research team via email and invited to take part in an online interview or focus group about their views and experiences of implementing and delivering the HAF Plus programme in 2024.

Purposive recruitment of young people ($n=8$) was supported by the HAF Plus leads at Gateshead Council and Gateshead's Youth Council. Young people were invited to take part in a face-to-face focus group in autumn 2024 about their views and experiences of the HAF Plus programme.

Ethics

Institutional ethical approval for the study was received from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee at Northumbria University (reference no: 7777). The research team from the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University worked alongside Gateshead Council to ensure that all elements of the research adhered to GDPR and related data protocols.

Procedure

Following the receipt of institutional ethical approval, information about the study was distributed to HAF Plus leads in Gateshead Council and HAF Plus delivery partners. Those who expressed an interest in taking part in an interview or focus group about their views and experiences of the HAF Plus programme were sent participant information sheets and consent forms. The researcher then organised a mutually convenient date and time for each individual to attend an online interview or an online focus group in autumn 2024. Two HAF Plus leads for Gateshead Council attended an online video call interview, each lasting approximately one hour. Delivery partners were given the option to attend an online video call interview, or an online video call focus group; one member of delivery

staff attended an online interview, which lasted approximately one hour. Two focus groups (one hour each) were conducted with delivery partners, consisting of two and five individuals, respectively.

Furthermore, information about the HAF Plus evaluation was shared with young people who were involved with Gateshead's Youth Council. Young people who were interested in participating in a focus group to share their views and experiences of HAF Plus were given an information sheet and consent form, as well as a parental information sheet and consent form, and asked to complete and return both forms before the focus group took place. A date and time for the face-to-face focus group was arranged in autumn 2024, and the focus group lasted for approximately one hour.

At the start of all interviews and focus groups, the purpose of the evaluation was reiterated to participants. All participants were reminded of their right to withdraw, asked if they had any questions, and advised that the audio recording was to begin. Participants were each asked questions about their views and experiences of the HAF Plus programme in 2024 that they were involved with, using questions from the co-produced, semi-structured interview schedule. Following each interview and focus group, participants were thanked for their time and asked if they had any questions. The audio recording was stopped, and each participant received a debrief summary about the research. No participants opted out of the research project at any stage. As such, all qualitative data that were collected were used for subsequent analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were used to conduct accurate verbatim transcription. Data were analysed in accordance with the six main stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2021), using NVivo 14 for organisational purposes.

Findings

Qualitative Findings: HAF Plus Leads

Five main themes were identified across the data collected with HAF Plus leads in Gateshead: (1) Key elements of the HAF Plus model, (2) Recruitment of young people, (3) Facilitators to implementing and delivering HAF Plus, (4) Challenges and barriers to implementing and delivering HAF Plus, and (5) Benefits of HAF Plus. Sub-themes related to each main theme are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes related to HAF Plus leads’ views and experiences of the HAF Plus programme in 2024.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Key elements of the HAF Plus model	Independent travel; Meal/food vouchers; Health and wellbeing activities; Safeguarding
Recruitment of young people	Youth-centred advertising; School support; Targeting Free School Meals (FSM) Children
Facilitators to implementing and delivering HAF Plus	Trusted partnerships; Reduced costs; Incentives; HAF Plus app
Challenges and barriers to implementing and delivering HAF Plus	Time and workload; Attendance
Benefits of HAF Plus	Financial; Independence; New experiences; Friendships; Confidence

Theme 1: Key elements of the HAF Plus model

The HAF Plus leads highlighted the key elements of their HAF Plus offer which they felt were instrumental in the programme being appealing to teenagers: independent travel, meal/food vouchers, health and wellbeing activities, and safeguarding.

Independent travel

The Gateshead HAF Plus model was described as an independent travel model, which leads felt made their offer unique compared to other similar programmes across England:

“I think it is a very sit alone programme nationally...we call it an independent travel model.” (Participant 1)

Young people were given a travel pass to use across all public transport networks in the region:

“You need to then plan for the young people to get there, which is the most difficult part. So, our independent travel model is based around, well the key element of it is an all zones travel pass that the young people get.” (Participant 1)

“It was a 28 day all zones travel pass, which was all of the Metro, local trains between Blaydon and Sunderland and all Tyne and Wear buses.” (Participant 2)

HAF Plus leads acknowledged that the cost of travel can prevent young people from attending activities and experiences in the school holidays. Including a travel pass within the HAF Plus programme reduced this issue for young people and their families:

“It comes up time and time again that the cost of travel prevents young people from doing activities and getting into places.” (Participant 2)

“So that meant that they could get to any of the activities that we were putting on and if they wanted to get the Metro to have a day at the beach, they could do that without recourse to ourselves, without recourse to parents.” (Participant 2)

Meal/food vouchers

The HAF Plus leads acknowledged the need for flexibility in accessing meals/food that was available to teenagers taking part in the programme. As such, participants were given a range of food vouchers each week for several food outlets across Gateshead:

“The food offer this summer was far superior to what we did in the pilot back in 2023” (Participant 1)

“The Greggs offer was wide geographically” (Participant 2)

“We thought the young people have the ability to get to the Metro Centre, well to get to anywhere, so if you're out and about you've got your Greggs voucher, or you can visit a couple of Subway stores, or once a week you can come and have a sit down meal at Grounded Kitchen, or take away from Grounded Kitchen as well. So that was our thinking behind the offer that we came up with.” (Participant 2)

This was important as HAF Plus leads recognised that packed lunches were often unsuitable for teenagers who were attending a range of activities across different providers, and a variety of food was necessary to ensure the young people would enjoy it regardless of their preferences:

“Especially with teenagers, the difference there was palatable. They would not want a packed lunch. They just wouldn't want a packed lunch. You've got to walk a line between good school food standards and what that could be if you were walking that line, and what the young people are actually going to eat. So, it's really important that we get that.” (Participant 1).

In line with the requirements stipulated by the DfE for HAF provision, HAF Plus leads ensured that the food offer at each food outlet adhered to School Food Standards:

“We want to give the young people as broad a diet as we can but keep trying to keep within that School Food Standard sort of thing that the DfE like to make sure it is in place. So, the planning is really about those discussions that you have with your partners to ensure that (a) they fit into the programme, (b) that they can deliver a programme that's suitable for HAF Plus and that fits in with the DfE guidelines” (Participant 1)

As such, a nutrition scientist analysed the menus from the food outlets to ensure that only food that adhered to School Food Standards was offered to young people:

“We had a nutritionist from Northumbria University who worked with Greggs to identify what food we would class as at School Food Standards” (Participant 1)

“So, he went through the whole of the Greggs menu like drinks, snacks, sandwiches and everything and just identified which were School Food Standards and which weren't School Food Standards” (Participant 2)

Whilst the HAF Plus leads were pleased with the range of food vouchers offered for HAF Plus in summer 2024, they acknowledged that increasing the food offer is important for future years to meet a broader variety of tastes:

“We would look at increasing the food offer and maybe getting a couple of more outlets from the Metro Centre because I'm sure some of them will have been talking to each other about what we did.” (Participant 1)

This was also important in terms of increasing the geographic spread of outlets participating in the HAF Plus programme in Gateshead. HAF Plus leads recognised that some young people were initially unaware that they could only use their vouchers at certain stores, and expanding the offer would overcome this issue in future years:

“We told them that they had to use their tickets in the Metro Centre. One day, 15 of them turned up to the shop in Gateshead and tried to get a sandwich and the guy at Gateshead said, ‘I don't know what you're talking about’...” (Participant 1)

Promisingly, some providers are already in discussion with Gateshead Council about expanding the food offer in future years:

“The guy sent me an e-mail and he was really nice, and he said, ‘absolutely next time I'll join in and I'll do it’ - you know, so he wants to be involved” (Participant 1)

However, the HAF Plus leads recognised the challenges that can arise when trying to recruit appropriate food providers which young people would enjoy, whilst still adhering to School Food Standards; highlighting that healthy food outlets within the North East of England are somewhat limited:

“I think it's difficult to find a food provider that is acceptable to the majority of young people and I'm afraid Greggs have got that cornered. All the young people love Greggs, they just absolutely adore it.” (Participant 2)

“I guess that's another barrier as well. It's the availability in the North East and the conditioning of the people in the North East that, you know, these things are cheap, tasty, salty, good.” (Participant 2)

At the same time, supporting young people to make healthier choices based on the current offers that are in their immediate food scape is a small but important, positive step.

Health and wellbeing activities

The Gateshead HAF Plus offer included a range of activities which were thought to be beneficial for young people's health and wellbeing. Related to the food offer, some activities provided HAF Plus attendees with an opportunity to learn how to cook. In some cases, they then ate the meal that they cooked:

"They went up there and they learned about how to cook and the hygiene around cooking, the safety around cooking, the nutritional importance of food. So, they learned that, but in a fun way. And when they left, they had their lunch made and they went down to the cafeteria and ate their lunch." (Participant 1)

"I added on to there a couple of online cook-along that the young people could do."
(Participant 2)

Physical activity opportunities were also provided across the HAF Plus programme through a range of methods and delivered by a variety of providers:

"We had football and sports from Newcastle United Foundation. We had a lot of things going on like different ball sports were down there and we had keep fit and we had martial arts as well that the young people enjoyed. We had rock climbing. And so, they had a lot of exercise. I mean, just imagine them going and playing bowling, you know, they're out there bowling in an afternoon." (Participant 1)

"The other thing is the exercise. A lot of our activities were exercise based. We had tennis Tuesdays. We had lots of things happening at Newcastle United Foundation. We had free swimming that the young people could go on twice a week." (Participant 2)

Without always realising, the young people also participated in physical activity through walking to activities:

"They did a lot of walking a lot of them told me, you know they got their bus somewhere, but then they had to walk to other places where the where the buses didn't quite get them there or they didn't quite know which correct bus to get, so they did a lot of walking as well."
(Participant 2)

"I think generally the fact that they had their buses and bus pass probably meant they were walking a lot more like, you know, to and from the Metro Centre, to and from Northumbria University, rather than being ferried around in parents' cars" (Participant 2)

A range of health-related information was also delivered to young people by health professionals:

“We had Northumbria University up at the Community Hub at the Metro Centre doing a road show around health” (Participant 1)

“We also had St John Ambulance doing first aid for them as well and we also had SafetyWorks which is over in Newcastle and it's basically a setup mock Metro station and a mock lake and all the sort of things that young people would like to do, but they shouldn't really do. So, it's like crossing railway lines, going into water, setting fires, throwing things over fences, getting wrong off the police. So, we had the fire service there, the police were there and the St John were there and they talked the kids through all those different scenarios that they could get into trouble with. So, they all couldn't do it, but quite a number of them did it, so we had we had sessions there each week so that was pretty good.” (Participant 1)

Safeguarding

Safeguarding was a main priority for HAF Plus leads. Most processes and protocols HAF Plus leads implemented and followed were similar to the standard HAF offer that Gateshead Council provides:

“For providers obviously I got them to send me safeguarding registers and let me know who had DBS and things like that, just in the way that we did with standard HAF” (Participant 2)

Parents/carers were asked to give permission for their child to participate in all elements of the HAF Plus offer:

“We make sure that the parental permissions are always given for everything that we do. So, before the young people can even join the programme, the parents have to agree that their young people can attend all of these events and they're happy with that.” (Participant 1)

“There was like a tick box to say yes, give them access to the app or no, don't give them access. If I didn't have that e-mail address match, I would ring the parent and just make sure that they were happy for them to take part” (Participant 2)

In addition, the HAF Plus app, which was specifically developed for Gateshead Council's summer 2024 HAF Plus programme, provided young people with an easy and accessible way of contacting HAF Plus leads. Moreover, the Metro Centre Community Hub was a central base which young people could visit for in-person support, if required:

“So built into the app is a messaging system so they can message the HAF team if there's a problem they had or they felt unsafe. Inside the app as well there was a note section that outlined some safety messaging for young people when they were out, so if they felt unsafe, they could click on the noting section. If they didn't want to ring somebody and just thought “what shall I do?”, there was some simple ideas around personal safety that they could read

and then hopefully activate and do what it what it asked them to do I suppose.” (Participant 1)

“On the app there was two ways they could contact us. They could e-mail us through an e-mail on the app, or they could message us through the app. So as an example, if they felt unsafe somewhere or they felt uncomfortable somewhere they could contact us immediately through that system, or they could go to the advice notes section on the app around safety and personal safety and it would give them ideas around personal safety about, you know, try to be with a friend when you're going out, don't go to places you don't know where they are, and don't talk to strangers basically, you know.” (Participant 1)

“The app had, in the notifications and the resources section, it had our contact details, both phone number and e-mail and we were obviously publicising that we were in the Metro Centre between 11 till 4 so there was someone they could phone, there was someone that they could actually come and physically see.” (Participant 2)

Theme 2: Recruitment of young people

The HAF Plus leads discussed the various channels used for recruiting young people to take part in HAF Plus and explained the importance of youth-centred advertising, school support and targeting FSM children.

Youth-centred advertising

When planning the HAF Plus offer, the leads considered including activities which are typically enjoyed by teenagers, such as visits to the cinema. This would not only attract young people to the programme in the current year, but would support peer-to-peer marketing of HAF Plus for subsequent years:

“The cinema is always popular because when they go back in September, it's like ‘oh, did you see the latest film?’ and they can be like, ‘oh, yeah, I did see that actually’. And they don't need to say, ‘well, I saw it because I'm on free school meals and I managed to get free tickets’. It was just like, ‘yeah I saw that it was great’ and you know, we can discuss that” (Participant 2)

Ensuring that activities were fun was noted to be extremely important in making the HAF Plus programme successful. Indeed, successful marketing was thought to influence whether young people decided to take part:

“It's got to have a fun element. You know, it's like I've worked hard at school all year. It's got to have some sort of bragging rights.” (Participant 2)

As such, delivery partners were each required to advertise and market their own activities to young people, and HAF Plus leads reinforced the importance of highlighting the fun element of their offer to appeal to the young people:

“I’ve had enough conversations saying how are you going to sell this? How are you going to make it so that you know...you’ll have heard me say it 1,000 times. How are we going to sell this to these young people?” (Participant 2)

School support

Secondary schools were an important channel used to reach young people for HAF Plus:

“So, it’s really using the school networks, the secondary school networks, and they got us where we were.” (Participant 1)

School staff supported in identifying the young people who were eligible for HAF Plus. In some cases, schools then organised group sessions for these pupils, which HAF Plus leads attended to explain the programme in more detail:

“We contacted our children’s services and the director of our Children Services and Gateshead Children’s Services and asked for her advice. She put us in contact with two groups of Head Teachers in Gateshead that we meet regularly. We put a presentation together. We asked them to present it at their quarterly meeting, you know, which they did” (Participant 1)

“So the Head Teachers, or in some case the business managers, would pull together a list of young people and they had to identify the young people who they knew would benefit from the programme during the summer and cross check that against free school meals to ensure that they were qualifying and then they would get the young people to come together in a small assembly type group and we would go in and explain the programme to them, and we would ask them then to sign up to the programme. If the young people wanted to do it, the young person had to tell their year tutor, who then would contact the business manager and tell them this young person said they want to do HAF Plus. Then the business manager would then send an e-mail to the parent.” (Participant 1)

Parents/carers were typically supportive of their child being involved in the HAF Plus programme when they had been recruited via their school:

“We would ring parents up and say ‘your daughter would like to become part of the HAF Plus programme in during July and August in 2024. Are you happy for them to be engaged in it?’ And we would get a positive yes from that or a no. But we didn’t get any no responses

from that, they were all yes. So that was the process we used, and we think it worked really well.” (Participant 1)

However, not all schools were forthcoming with supporting recruitment for the HAF Plus programme:

“So, we tried to get into the schools because obviously the schools know absolutely the children who are on free school meals or who would benefit from this. I think there's nine secondary schools in Gateshead and we managed to engage with three.” (Participant 2)

“We had a meeting with the Head Teacher there. And that was as far as that as that went. Oh, and in another school, it was the same again, we had a meeting with the Head Teacher but they said we could come into a lunchtime but then they cancelled it.” (Participant 2)

Targeting FSM children

As the DfE stipulates that HAF should be focused upon children who are eligible for means-tested FSM, the HAF Plus leads were conscious of increasing the numbers of FSM-eligible young people taking part:

“We try to increase the number of groups that are involved and organisations that deliver it, but we also need to increase the numbers of free school meal children who attend” (Participant 1)

However, this demographic can be challenging to recruit. To boost attendance, the HAF Plus leads reassured families about the beneficial nature of the programme:

“So, it's not just them, it's their families and it can cause a problem when you ask them to attend on a regular basis to a programme, which is something that they're not used to. So that can be a big problem for us, so we've got ways around that and that's about us and making sure our community members engage more with the families and reassure the families that the programme will do nothing but benefit them and their young people.” (Participant 1)

GIS mapping and partner organisations were used to reach eligible families:

“We target them through GIS mapping where we make sure that the programmes we deliver are based in neighbourhoods with high levels of benefits related free school meals children who live in that area. We also use our partner organisations to identify them, so that could be a school who they'll know within their own cohort of young people who are on free school meals.” (Participant 1)

Moreover, the council supported HAF Plus recruitment through posting an information letter to families who were eligible for FSM:

“For one reason or another, in the lead up to the summer holidays, the Council sent out a letter with the vouchers attached and unbeknownst to me, they went on to our website and they put in this is HAF and they talked about our standard HAF and this is HAF Plus, and said because you're on free school meals, you are entitled to this” (Participant 2)

Despite the HAF Plus programme being aimed towards young people who are eligible for FSM, eliminating stigma associated with FSM eligibility and HAF Plus attendance was also important:

“We've got to try to still target young people who are on benefits related free school meals. Now that's hard enough with the under twelves, but you certainly can't talk to teenagers about that because they get very embarrassed about things like that and it's not something that they prefer to talk about. So, we had to do it in a very covert way.” (Participant 1)

As such, being invited to participate in the HAF Plus programme was often framed as being a reward:

“A lot of the schools were saying, you know, you've been really good at school and that's why we're giving you this rather than saying it's for free school meals.” (Participant 2)

Theme 3: Facilitators to implementing and delivering HAF Plus

The HAF Plus leads discussed various elements of the HAF Plus programme which they believed were instrumental to its success, including trusted partnership, reduced costs, incentives and the HAF Plus app.

Trusted partnerships

To implement and deliver the HAF Plus programme, trusted partnerships were formed with many organisations across the region; some of which developed through involvement and support in the planning, implementation and delivery of HAF and HAF Plus over multiple years:

“We have some very helpful and supportive partners that help us out with the development of the HAF programme.” (Participant 1)

“So, it's talking to all those partners, you know, the bakeries, the cinemas, the colleges, Gateshead College have been a great support this summer, our health partners as well, things like St John ambulance and SafetyWorks in Newcastle. So, the time is having those discussions and talking through all of the outcomes that both we want, but also they want as well as a provider and that can take a lot of time.” (Participant 1)

“They've sort of, not only delivered programmes for us within HAF Plus, but they've also advised us what programmes we should deliver as well, which is really important because obviously with HAF Plus you put an offer out there and you've got to work through when it's finished which ones were the ones that worked and which ones were the ones that didn't work.” (Participant 1)

As such, these delivery partners could be trusted to deliver their programme successfully and independently, which relieved administration pressures on the HAF Plus leads:

“In the lead up, we had lots of communication but during the summer we barely had to communicate at all. They were just accessing the back-end system of the app. They never contacted us with any issues at all so that was great.” (Participant 2)

Likewise, trusted partnerships were established with food providers:

“We've built a fantastic relationship with our food providers.” (Participant 1)

New partnerships developed during the 2024 programme, allowing the offer to expand wider than previously across Gateshead:

“We've built some really important relationships with big, big organisations.” (Participant 1)

“It was good to establish some new relationships as well.” (Participant 2)

However, the HAF Plus leads noted that some of the larger corporate delivery partnerships were often quite transactional:

“There were very much some people where it was very transactional. We are buying this from you.” (Participant 2)

Reduced costs

Through developing relationships with a range of organisations, the HAF Plus leads were sometimes able to negotiate reduced costs for HAF Plus activities, which allowed them to expand the programme and offer more to the young people attending:

“We ask them to get involved and we're lucky in a lot of ways because they do get involved and they do give us reduced costs as well.” (Participant 1)

“We negotiated a cheaper price with them.” (Participant 2)

Likewise, travel companies and food outlets offered reduced costs for the programme, which was beneficial for the HAF Plus budget:

“You have to have those big, longer discussions with Nexus to make sure you're getting the best value you can for those young people on the transport” (Participant 1)

“Financially, again they were going to gift us a substantial amount of free foods, and the Greggs offer was wide geographically.” (Participant 2)

Incentives

To capture the interest of young people, the HAF Plus leads sometimes used incentives; particularly

when they felt the offer was beneficial for young people to attend. For example, Northumbria University provided a range of free activities, so the council was able to hire a coach to transport young people to the university. This was particularly important as only a few young people had physically visited the university, with most prior interactions occurring through university staff visiting schools:

“When it was something that we really, really wanted to happen, we used incentives. For instance, for the Northumbria University day, we had a coach booked. We wanted 40 people on that coach. We knew that it was an excellent offer.” (Participant 2)

“We bought some go karting tickets, which is a high, high value item and then we said everyone who is actually on that coach gets entered into a prize draw to win these go karting tickets and they all wanted to win the go karting. So that had a big impact, and we did that with a few other smaller things as well where we knew we wanted it to take place.” (Participant 2)

HAF Plus leads noted this method as being successful, and would likely use incentives in the future increase young people’s engagement with the programme:

“So, incentives are another thing which I would look at in the future.” (Participant 2)

HAF Plus app

As the reach and breadth of the HAF Plus programme increased from the pilot in 2023 to the roll out of the programme in 2024, developing an online booking system that young people and providers could access and use easily was important:

“If we're going to do any sort of scale, even just doubling, there was a realisation that we needed to enlist some sort of IT support.” (Participant 2)

“It meant that we had fewer people coming to the hub to need our services. It meant that data gathering was just automatic. So last year we had to go through piles and piles of sign-up sheets. It meant that providers could tell how many people were booked onto their system. I wasn't having to like send an e-mail saying “you've got 10 people booked on. These are the contact details. These are their allergies. This is this. This is this”. So, it just meant it was achievable whereas we couldn't have done it at the scale without it really.” (Participant 2)

Most activities could be booked via the app, which the HAF Plus leads found to be successful:

“The app was an absolute godsend, like I think I said before, probably 95% of the programme was app based.” (Participant 1)

HAF Plus leads were keen to rectify any reported issues, to ensure all elements of the app were always functioning seamlessly:

“I did get one phone call from a parent where the geographic data on the app wasn't up to date, so young people were finding it difficult to find where they were, and that was obviously an experience for us. We added ‘What 3 Words’...” (Participant 2)

However, some young people were not as ICT literate as the HAF Plus leads had assumed. This was important learning for the HAF Plus leads to ensure digital exclusion does not occur in the future:

“One of the reasons we went for an app was that everybody was like ‘oh, well, it's absolutely how all of the young people communicate. They've all got their smartphones’. But there was a real lack of ICT knowledge in a significant proportion. You know, I would say, ‘can you send me an e-mail?’ so that I would have a young person's e-mail address so that I could check why their app wasn't working and they would come back at me and say ‘I don't know how to send an e-mail’.” (Participant 2)

Importantly, to overcome digital exclusion, young people were always offered an offline alternative:

“We did ask for Nexus to give us 10 paper-based tickets so if anyone was really, really struggling or they didn't have a phone and they were on our non-digital solution, then we had that as well.” (Participant 2)

“I thought one boy in particular, who was on the offline version because he wasn't allowed a mobile phone, took the most advantage out of everybody.” (Participant 2)

Due to word-of-mouth surrounding the success of the HAF Plus app, other local authorities are interested in developing or purchasing a similar booking system:

“We've got several local authorities in contact with us about how they can get their hands on it.” (Participant 1)

However, elements of the app could still be improved, such as notifications to remind young people to attend activities, which may improve attendance overall:

“We know it works now, so we can increase its capacity, and we can get more done with it.” (Participant 1)

“Notifications on the app, so I want it to ping up on people's phones like don't forget this is happening today.” (Participant 2)

Theme 4: Challenges and barriers to implementing and delivering HAF Plus

The HAF Plus leads highlighted a number of barriers which made the planning, implementation and delivery of HAF Plus challenging. These included time and workload, and attendance.

Time and workload

The planning and implementation stages of the HAF Plus programme, such as meetings with delivery partners, were noted to be very time consuming for the HAF Plus leads.

“So, it's all the emails, the meetings face-to-face, the telephone conversations. It's basically non-stop. It's every day. It never eases off.” (Participant 1)

Planning for the next school holiday period takes place months in advance, sometimes before the previous programme is even complete, which can be challenging in terms of an ever-increasing workload:

“Even halfway through the summer programme we were already starting to plan the Christmas programme, which seems crazy when Christmas is five months away. But that's how HAF works and there's just no room to breathe sometimes.” (Participant 1)

“So, it took a full year from the end of HAF Plus 2023 to start HAF Plus 2024.” (Participant 2)

The strict, but necessary, processes related to the commissioning and procurement of the HAF Plus app were also time consuming and created challenges with the planning and implementation of the programme in 2024:

“So, you can imagine the process we had to go through with our commissioning and procurement. So, we started in the September of 2023 and we didn't get the green light until April 2024. So, it took us 8 months and it wasn't anyone's fault. It was just the way that local government works because everything's got to be just right, so all the protections had to be in place and we had to make sure that data was protected as well on the app, which was a big, big part of it.” (Participant 1)

“There was many times when I thought having an app and developing an app within the council environment is very, very difficult. I wish I could think of another way, but I couldn't think of another way.” (Participant 2)

“Its procurement had taken so long to come through, we'd missed out a lot of testing time, and it meant that that app was, in some areas, flaky understandably because obviously the developers wanted to test it, and I wanted to test it. We did do a test weekend which did raise some issues, but did sort of prove that it was good enough to continue.” (Participant 2)

Attendance

HAF Plus leads were aware that some young people registered for activities but failed to attend, and that some sessions were unpopular.

“It's inconvenient, especially for the cooking stuff where you're expecting people, and you've bought ingredients or you're just prepared.” (Participant 2)

“Some of the programme content wasn't as popular as we thought.” (Participant 1)

“We had a about half a dozen of the 30 different things we had on offer that were very poorly attended. And we tried everything to get them to go to it, but they just didn't want to.” (Participant 1)

HAF leads speculated that some sessions were perhaps too similar to term-time school activities, which may not have been of interest to the young people during the school holidays:

“They don't always like things that they think might be more school-like, if that makes sense. They've just left school for the summer, and they don't want to do more of it, you know. It's just like having a bit of fun, I suppose.” (Participant 1)

“Some of them just were just doing the same as they did in the term-time and not appreciating that you need to make this exciting for young people to make them want to come.” (Participant 2)

Other activities, such as careers advice sessions, were not well attended when delivered as a stand-alone activity:

“They have a classroom set up to tell young people about what they might want to do later in their lives with their careers, and we found that an age group of 13 to 16 is the wrong age group for that sort of thing. The 13-, 14- and 15-year-olds aren't even thinking of that. They're thinking of having fun in the summer.” (Participant 1)

Where numbers were low, some sessions were cancelled in advance. Whilst this reduced costs for delivery organisations who did not need to commit resources, HAF Plus leads found that contacting the young people was often challenging; particularly if they failed to check their emails regularly:

“When there's one or two booked on that's the hardest situation, because then you've got to get in touch with them, and like I say, they're not great at checking their e-mail, so you need to ring them. So that caused a lot of issues.” (Participant 2)

HAF Plus leads discussed that removing unpopular activities, and overbooking to a higher percentage, will be considered in the future to eliminate these issues:

“For me it was thinking if a part of the programme doesn't work, take it off and put something else in. Don't try to make the young people do something they don't want to do because that that never works. Not with teenagers. You just need to get something that works.” (Participant 1)

“I feel like constrict the programme to the things I know are popular and overbook much more, because now this year we've got statistics that we can base the overbooking profile on.”
(Participant 2)

“Fewer activities overbooked to a much higher percentage is what we're considering.”
(Participant 2)

Theme 5: Benefits of HAF Plus

Despite these challenges, the HAF Plus leads reported multiple benefits of the programme: financial; independence; new experiences; friendships; and confidence.

Financial

The financial cost of activities and travel during the summer holidays can be problematic for families, with young people sometimes consequently unable to attend activities with friends:

“If you are a young person, you want to go to the cinema, you've got the choice of like not going to the cinema because you haven't got the money, or putting your hand out to your parents and saying ‘it's the holidays’, sort of thing.” (Participant 2)

The HAF Plus leads noted the significant financial benefit that the HAF Plus programme had on families, who would have otherwise been burdened with the expense of travel and activities over the summer holidays. This was perceived as being a crucial benefit of the programme for the families involved:

“When your own kids come to you and say, ‘I need this for this in the summer’. I mean a lot of families are in a worse position than some of us. Well, because of HAF Plus they can give them the things that they want. So, the HAF Plus programme just gives them that little bit of benefit and a little bit of bonus that they might not might not get. I think that's really, really important.” (Participant 1)

Indeed, it was estimated that families saved around **£400 per child** if they took part in multiple activities, and utilised their travel pass across the region, during summer 2024:

“I reckon our programme would have saved, if you did everything, £400 is my estimate. And that's a lot, if you got two or three children who are on free school meals, that's over a grand in savings if they do everything and they use the bus pass.” (Participant 2)

Independence

As young people typically travelled to activities using their travel pass, they increased their level of independence; a skill they will be able to utilise as they progress into adulthood:

“HAF Plus is that independent, adult developing model. They get independence and confidence, and it takes them to another place.” (Participant 1)

“HAF Plus is independent travel, not to a fixed location” (Participant 2)

The HAF Plus leads noted that young people therefore relied less upon their parents/carers over the school summer holidays:

“For HAF Plus, our kids are independent. They haven't got their parents. They haven't got a building. They haven't got people looking after them. These young people do what they want to do and that's how that's why they love it so much because they feel totally independent.” (Participant 1)

“I think generally the fact that they had their buses and bus pass probably meant they were walking a lot more...” (Participant 2)

New experiences

The activities included as part of the HAF Plus offer allowed young people to take part in a wide range of activities; some of which they had never experienced before. These opportunities made the summer holidays exciting for the young people who took part:

“They want to do things that they never have a chance of doing.” (Participant 1)

“They say ‘we've never had such an exciting summer ever. You know, we just don't get things like this normally’.” (Participant 1)

The HAF Plus leads recognised that without HAF Plus, many young people would simply stay at home during the school summer holidays, without any opportunity for new experiences, socialisation or developing new skills:

“HAF Plus is more character building I would think in what it does for young people, and how it assists young people. And one of the things that the young people often told us repeatedly was “I'd just be sitting on my PlayStation, sitting at home, watching telly and being bored if I wasn't doing this programme”. Now for a teenager that that doesn't sound right to me. They should have more in their life than that.” (Participant 1)

As the programme consisted of many activities which were also accessible to the general public (i.e. cinema), young people could discuss their exciting summer experiences with friends upon their return to school:

“The cinema is always popular because when they go back in September, it's like ‘oh, did you see the latest film?’ and they can be like, ‘oh, yeah, I did see that actually’. And they don't

need to say, 'well, I saw it because I'm on free school meals and I managed to get free tickets'. (Participant 2)

"I think the most significant impact is that the young people go back to school and have had as good a summer as people who are not on benefits related to free school meals. They have those bragging rights now, thanks to HAF Plus." (Participant 2)

Friendships

The HAF Plus leads observed the development of friendships (i.e. increased social capital) throughout the programme, which was associated with improved confidence:

"The friendship groups that develop within the HAF Plus programme enables the young people to feel more confident and feel more safe because they're in a friendship group. I think anyone, even adults, like friendship groups when they go out. So, I think that's something that HAF Plus has built." (Participant 1)

"Lots of people made new friends and I saw that with my own eyes, which was great." (Participant 2)

One parent expressed thanks to the HAF Plus leads for providing their child with opportunities for socialisation which they otherwise would not have had:

"So, one that sort of stood out was a parent of a Ukrainian lad who didn't have any friends. So, he's literally only just come to England a few months ago. He had started school and made a few friends, on the edges of friends I suppose, and within about three days of HAF Plus he had joined a group of young people and they thought he was amazing and his mum just sent an e-mail saying 'thank you so much. I never thought he would have friends again'. And it just really stood out." (Participant 1)

Confidence

Due to increased independence and new friendships, the young people reported to the HAF Plus leads that they felt more confident because of their involvement in the programme:

"They tell us all the time their confidence is boosted through it." (Participant 1)

Qualitative Findings: Deliverers

Three main themes were identified across the data collected with HAF Plus deliverers: (1) facilitators related to implementing and delivering HAF Plus, (2) barriers to implementing and delivering HAF Plus, and (3) perceived benefits related to HAF Plus. Sub-themes related to each main theme are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes related to HAF Plus deliverers' views and experiences of the HAF Plus programme in 2024.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Facilitators related to implementing and delivering HAF Plus	Trusted partnerships and available support; HAF Plus app; Strategic alignment
Barriers to implementing and delivering HAF Plus	Logistics; Marketing; Food availability; Behaviour
Perceived benefits related to HAF Plus	New skills and experiences; Socialisation opportunities

Theme 1: Facilitators related to implementing and delivering HAF Plus

Individuals who were involved with delivering HAF Plus activities noted a range of important facilitators for implementing and delivering the programme: trusted partnerships and available support; the HAF Plus app; strategic alignment.

Trusted partnerships and available support

Delivery partners felt that building a good relationship with the HAF Plus leads at Gateshead Council was key to successful delivery. These relationships were reciprocal, and HAF Plus leads could trust the delivery partners to provide high quality sessions as part of the programme:

“We're just a trusted partner that they know they can work with” (Interview 1)

“We're really passionate about how much involvement we've had from a very small start supporting the first year of HAF to then being encouraged to work with Gateshead as well. And then keep that partnership going and it's really important for us.” (Interview 1)

The delivery partners valued the approachable nature of the HAF Plus leads, who were available to tackle any concerns quickly:

“They were exactly what we needed in that room really. The sort of approach with the young people, with the teachers and with us in general was absolutely spot on, and never waited longer than like an hour for a response” (Focus group 1)

“I think they were a really good team. We didn't have any issues with them. They were super helpful, they replied pretty much immediately at all times, which is really good. Any questions or queries or any problems I had, they were able to kind of give me a solution really quickly.” (Focus group 1)

“The way they were with the young people was really good. They had like a nice, friendly approach with them which I suppose is exactly what you need really. You know, if you if you've got young people that might have any problems or whatever, I do feel like they would been able to approach them.” (Focus group 1)

Some deliverers expressed an interest to network and develop partnerships with other delivery organisations involved with HAF Plus. They suggested that networking to learn about each other's HAF Plus activities, and promoting these to young people, could improve session attendance overall:

“It would be quite interesting if we all knew about each other's projects, so we could in-house promote, so I think it was a DJ one on one of the days and we could be like ‘what are you going to that this afternoon?’ and send them there. When you know the locations and you can map it out.” (Focus group 1)

“But like, if we all knew each other's programmes, like if we give ourselves an extra five people a day. So, we'd book for 50, but we've got a secret five. We could then get in contact with each other and say I've got five people here that have been here this morning and I'm going to send them your way this afternoon.” (Focus group 1)

“There's positives of like being in contact with each other rather than just being just out there on our own.” (Focus group 1)

HAF Plus app

The HAF Plus app provided the delivery partners with a simple and accessible registration system:

“The app is great, and I enjoyed the simplicity of having an online register just ready to log into when you get there - that that felt different from any other initiatives that I've worked with” (Focus group 1)

“Gateshead had an app which seemed to work really, really well for the registrations of the participants. They seemed to connect with that quite well, and it seemed to work quite well.” (Focus group 2)

The HAF Plus app was noted as being a suitable and easy method of registration for young people, as they are often experienced in using similar technology in their daily lives. Deliverers felt this simplified, digital system may have increased signups for the programme:

“We got a lot of signups from the Gateshead side, and I think that is possibly to do with because kids want apps, kids want stuff that they can book on via their phone. They don't have to go on the browser to the website and they want to see an app and literally click on it.”
(Focus group 2)

One organisation delivered HAF Plus across two local authorities in the North East, and suggested that having one centralised online registration system, potentially linked to the HAF Plus app, would be beneficial:

“If we're going to do joint up working then it's having that one centralised registration system, ideally with an app, and I think that would be good, yeah.” (Focus group 2)

“It's the first time we've done a joint up venture on a similar project. So, it's probably a conversation of is there like one platform that I can use together? I think it would benefit massively.” (Focus group 2)

They also recommended that more information about participants is available on any HAF Plus registration system, namely emergency contacts and medical information:

“I think on some of the registers we kind of had name, age and a contact number. We probably need a bit more in terms of like medical information, because having just more kind of medical information and background information as well as emergency contacts, date of birth, all that kind of stuff is important. Just having more information on the person is important. For both systems, we had very minimal information on the participants. When it's our own, we have like 20 different things that we have on the register. So yeah, it's probably just more info, name, date of birth, emergency contacts, disabilities, medical information. Just having all that on there just for the worst case.” (Focus group 2)

It was also discussed that in 2024, the time available prior to the summer holidays for deliverers and young people to become familiar with the app was limited, due to delays with procurement. However, in future years, having earlier access to the app could allow for additional digital marketing, which could be beneficial for session registration and attendance:

“I think more bedding in of the app and how they sign up to sessions would have been brilliant, because if we'd have had a longer run in with those contacts on that system we could have done a little bit of keep-warm like ‘are you still coming? Are you going to be there on Saturday?’ Maybe that side of things would have been better.” (Focus group 1)

Strategic alignment

For many of the organisations, HAF Plus aligned with their missions, values, objectives and goals related to supporting young people and providing new opportunities:

“It's very on mission. It's very on mission to reach an audience that wouldn't come. So, it fits and it works with us really well.” (Interview 1)

“One of our main goals is like connecting with people to raise aspirations, to give people opportunities and create opportunities, and the more people and the more programmes we get involved with, the more different participants we get involved with, then we are obviously reaching more people, yeah. That's part of our values, the values we've got are raising aspirations, ambitions and giving people opportunities.” (Focus group 2)

For others, being involved in HAF Plus was an extension of their school term-time engagement with young people:

“For us it was kind of a natural extension for us because during term-time we work with educational institutions and obviously they're closed over the summer. So, it just felt like the right thing to do, to do a similar sort of thing over the summer.” (Focus group 1)

Some organisations used the HAF Plus programme as a way of reaching young people and families across the region who may otherwise have not been aware of the opportunities that they can provide:

“It's always important for me to raise awareness of the groups that we already have. So, if they come and enjoy something, I would say ‘well, we do have a group that's free every Saturday that you're more than welcome to come to, just join the list’. That is main point, it's just an added benefit, an added bonus, and if one person out of all the 30 people, wanted to come to one of my groups then, yeah, win, win.” (Focus group 1)

Theme 2: Barriers to implementing and delivering HAF Plus

A number of barriers were identified by deliverers in relation to the implementation and delivery of the HAF Plus programme, including logistics, marketing, food availability and behaviour.

Logistics

Several logistical elements of the programme were raised as barriers for HAF Plus deliverers. For example, some providers noted that providing sessions for low numbers of attendees was not financially viable, and suggested opening sessions to the public to overcome this issue:

“I think it's definitely worthwhile, but there's definitely a logistical element too. We need to change some form of logistics of making sure it's open for other people so it's just a bit more worthwhile. There's a better way of spending that money, I think.” (Focus group 1)

“Financially, it was a huge loss for us. We had two staff members at all times, and we hired a room and bought equipment. We can't really do that for one child unfortunately.” (Focus group 1)

The time taken to plan the delivery of HAF Plus sessions was another logistical barrier, as the programme took more planning and organisation than many providers expected:

“It was probably naive of me to go into it thinking ‘oh yeah, it's just like one of our normal programmes that we normally do’. There's a little bit more work to be done, but that's not saying that it can't be done, but it just needs longer to go into it.” (Focus group 1)

“I feel like it took up a lot more time than I originally expected.” (Focus group 1)

The administration elements of being a HAF Plus deliverer was also time consuming:

“There was a lot of time getting on the app, making sure the registers were finished. On the days that I wasn't in, I'd have a member of staff there for me, so that would mean I would then write up a register of people, and then I'd have to be at home and log on and make sure things are working. So, the administration side of it took a lot more time than expected. It became another full day. Another job that I'd normally do rather than just as something on the side.” (Focus group 1)

HAF Plus deliverers speculated about why some sessions were poorly attended. One suggestion related to potential distractions available at the Metro Centre, which was the central in-person base for the HAF Plus in Gateshead:

“I don't know whether the Metro Centre was the right place for it because there's too many other distractions.” (Focus group 1)

“It's possible that they get distracted and think ‘I've got that session in an hour, but I've got my cinema voucher to use’.” (Focus group 1)

Marketing

Deliverers were required to market their sessions for the summer 2024 HAF Plus programme, in terms of describing the activities on offer to capture the attention of young people. However, many of the deliverers acknowledged that despite their attempts to engage young people, attendance at some sessions remained low:

“Marketing-wise, I provided a jazzy picture, a good blurb. I, myself, came along and I like to think of myself as an asset. I put myself out there, and said get yourselves along to the session. And it seemed nothing worked. Nothing struck a chord.” (Focus group 1)

“I'd been along to a couple of the launch sessions and did manage to speak to some young people who I honestly thought might have signed up, particularly a group of a few young girls who were like ‘oh this looks mint’. And then they didn't sign up to the session via the app. We

actually only across the four sessions that we were putting on, we got one sign up to the first session who then didn't show.” (Focus group 1)

Upon reflection, some deliverers acknowledged their engagement in marketing their offer was limited, resulting in low attendance at their sessions, and recognised that more promotion is required for increased uptake in future years:

“I think I would spend a lot more time maybe promoting it.” (Focus group 1)

“I think next time we can probably try and utilise our media department more and advertise it more.” (Focus group 2)

Furthermore, considering the timing of marketing and promotion of sessions was recognised as being important:

“I think for every HAF organisation it's, kind of, when's the right time to start advertising stuff? You don't want to leave it too late in the last summer term because then kids have like lost their train of thought, they're ready for the summer, but then you don't want to advertise it too early so that they forget what they've booked on for in the summer. So, its finding that right timeframe when to start advertising things and thinking what's going to be the most impactful to get people to see there's stuff going on in the summer and we should get booked onto this.” (Focus group 2)

The drop-in sessions held at the Metro Centre Community Hub, which deliverers could attend to promote their activities to young people, provided a useful opportunity for promotion and marketing. Deliverers hoped that more of these sessions will be available in the future:

“Gateshead did some drop-in sessions at the Metro Centre where people could go along, see how the app and things worked. For the period of time I was there, there was just kids coming in constantly, people coming in constantly. They were learning how to use the app, learning what activities on and giving providers the opportunity to actually speak to the participants as well and say, ‘look, this is what we do’. So, I think it would be good having a few more of them.” (Focus group 2)

Food availability

Whilst the deliverers acknowledged the value of HAF Plus in providing food vouchers for young people, they raised barriers related to accessing the food offer. For instance, where activities were not located at the Metro Centre, some young people had challenges accessing food in the nearby area:

“We're not in the Metro Centre so it would actually mean that people would have to go out of the way to get to the Metro Centre, to use the vouchers in Subway to then come here. Because I know they got Greggs as well [which worked elsewhere], but I think they got one voucher a

week or something, and they might have already used one that earlier in the week, and then the other vouchers could only be used in the Metro Centre. We are on the other side of Gateshead.” (Focus group 1)

At one organisation, staff travelled to food outlets on behalf of young people who only had remaining food vouchers redeemable in further away locations. They recommended that more outlets, spread across the region, are involved in the programme to ensure accessible food near all activities:

“We actually had a team member that was essentially doing food runs by the final few sessions just because people had the vouchers to use. A way to improve that would be so it's not necessarily just having to be food outlets in certain areas, it gives a bit more option.” (Focus group 1)

Behaviour

Some deliverers had prior experience of providing term-time sessions for schools and expected young people to behave in the same way during the school holidays. However, this was not always the case:

“So, when we have people in through the schools, I think they're in the mindset that it's organised through school but then this was during the summer holidays, so it was a lot more casual and behaviour wasn't really what you would expect to have from people coming in from school and things like that. They weren't really that interested in learning, so it didn't end up being what we expected.” (Focus group 1)

As such, behaviour expectations should be communicated clearly with young people ahead of, and during, HAF Plus sessions:

“That could probably be resolved by speaking to people beforehand and it could be our problem as well that we didn't communicate those expectations very well.” (Focus group 1)

Theme 3: Perceived benefits related to HAF Plus

From working directly with the young people during the summer holidays, the HAF Plus deliverers noted a range of benefits associated with programme attendance, such as new skills and experiences, and socialisation opportunities.

New skills and experiences

The range of activities that were on offer for HAF Plus afforded young people the opportunity to develop new skills and experiences:

“They're going places they wouldn't normally go to.” (Focus group 1)

Even where attendance at sessions was limited, the HAF Plus deliverers recognised the value of sessions for those who did take part; often providing opportunities which many young people may otherwise not encounter:

“If you get five or six through the door that have had a really good experience and otherwise would have been sat at home by themselves secluded, especially since COVID like this age group are still affected by it. So, it gets them out of their comfort zone, it gets them here and it gives them new opportunities. If that's six people rather than 20 people then those six people are getting a massive, massive benefit to it.” (Focus group 2)

“The opportunities that we can provide the participants that probably don't get the opportunities, or kind of a demographic that maybe gets left out. A lot of stuff centres around in that primary school and early secondary school age group. So, we always get parents asking what have you got for 14 plus, and teenagers. We want to get those 12, 13, 14-year-olds who are probably not going to clubs as much anymore.” (Focus group 2)

The sessions provided young people with the opportunity to develop skills related to their future career goals. For instance, deliverers from a gaming and technology organisation noted that work experience in this area is typically limited, but this opportunity was afforded through HAF Plus:

“One girl wanted to do concept in the future. So, the fact it was something to do with video gaming, it gave her some experience in that and to speak to us.” (Focus group 1)

“So that's given like an experience that he hasn't had before. So from different perspectives like there's quite a bit that was achieved even if some of them are like never going to touch and make games again, at least they were able to have space and just have, like some makes memories, whereas everyone else who maybe it ties into like future career goals and things like that will have that little bit of experiences with it.” (Focus group 1)

Young people could discuss their experiences with friends upon their return to school:

“I see them having a good time. So, I'm sure that when the young people go back and they're talking about things in the summer, they're talking very positively about the experiences they've had.” (Interview 1)

Socialisation opportunities

The HAF Plus programme also enabled young people to develop new friendships and interact with others from a variety of backgrounds:

“They're probably interacting with people that they wouldn't normally interact with.” (Focus group 1)

“Some people were there for the fun of it. I think it gave them like a space to just go have some fun and relax and make new friends because I get the feeling that maybe it's because they didn't really have much else to do and they were kind of just wanting something to do.”
(Focus group 1)

Often, sessions provided a safe space for young people to attend together, across the summer holidays:

“It's reaching a really tough demographic that probably wants to spend time chilling with their mates just out on the streets, so it's giving them like meaningful activity.” (Focus group 2)

Qualitative Findings: Young People

Four main themes were identified across the data collected with young people in Gateshead who took part in HAF Plus: (1) advertisement and registration, (2) successful elements of HAF Plus, (3) barriers and recommendations, and (4) perceived benefits for young people. Sub-themes related to each main theme are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes related to young people's views and experiences of the HAF Plus programme in 2024.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Advertisement and Information	School information; Pre-established youth networks; HAF Plus ambassadors
Successful Elements of HAF Plus	Food vouchers; Travel pass; HAF Plus app; Whole days of activities; Incentives
Barriers and Recommendations	Timing clashes; Food availability
Perceived Benefits for Young People	Reduced boredom; New opportunities; Developing life skills; Increased physical activity; Social opportunities

Theme 1: Advertisement and Information

Young people shared how they received information about the HAF Plus programme, as well as recommendations for how to advertise the programme in future years: school information; pre-established youth networks; HAF Plus ambassadors.

School information

Some schools advertised the HAF Plus programme to young people:

“We had some advertising through school this year, so I probably would have signed up through school for it.”

“A couple of teachers would tell you about it.”

Conversely, other schools did not provide any information about the HAF Plus programme, and some young people were therefore unsure how their peers had become aware of it:

“My school didn’t advertise it.”

“We had a lot of people signed up for it, but I actually don’t know how they heard about it. It must have been through school, but I wasn’t involved.”

Pre-established youth networks

Another important way of communicating information about the HAF Plus programme to eligible young people was through pre-established youth networks, such as Gateshead’s Youth Council and Young Inspectors programme:

“I was part of Young Inspectors, so I actually got on it before through that.”

One young person explained that without attending a pre-established youth network, they may not have heard about the HAF Plus programme:

“I don’t think I would be able to know about it if I didn’t come here.”

HAF Plus ambassadors

Interestingly, one young person noted that if they were not part of a trusted and pre-established youth network, they may not have registered for HAF Plus due to believing it was too good to be true. As such, they expressed concerns that other eligible young people may feel this way and miss out on an important opportunity:

“I think if I heard about it somewhere else, I think it would be a thing of that I’d be thinking like that’s like too good to be true and I wouldn’t sign up to it because I’d be thinking that’s not going to be like...they’ve probably bigged it up to be something it’s not, so I’d not bother because like, you know, if you’re saying you can do these activities for free and you can get this food for free some people would be like yeah that’s too good to be true.”

Consequently, young people advocated for an ambassador programme, where those who have attended HAF Plus previously can share their views and experiences to others as a means of advertisement:

“Get young people like us or people who have done it to maybe do some kind of advertisement saying this is actually real”.

Moreover, the young people suggested using social media to share their experiences with others:

“There could be a big thing like showing people like actually doing it and then people would be like ‘oh, yeah!’”

“Oh I remember there was a hashtag last year [in the pilot]! Get the hashtag back!”

Theme 2: Successful elements of HAF Plus

The young people who participated in HAF Plus highlighted a number of elements of the programme which they felt were successful, including food vouchers, the travel pass, the HAF Plus app, whole days of activities and incentives.

Food vouchers

The range and variety of food that was available at no cost to the young people was deemed to be a successful element of the programme:

“Subway, Greggs and Grounded Kitchen is good.”

“I loved Grounded Kitchen with all my heart and soul.”

A Korean restaurant in the Metro Centre, Grounded Kitchen, was a new addition to the HAF Plus programme in 2024, which enabled young people to try new foods which they had never experienced before:

“I didn’t know if I’d like it, but I really liked Grounded Kitchen.”

Young people appreciated being able to attend a restaurant environment and could adapt the menu choices to suit their preferences:

“The way you did it, you could use the QR code on the tables and you could modify it however you wanted, so you could take anything off, that was really good.”

“I think with the nourish bowls you could choose what you wanted on them and what you didn’t want on them so it was quite a variety, you could have something different each time”.

Overall, the food offer was described by young people as being good quality:

“It was good quality food though, it was really, really nice.”

Travel pass

The travel pass allowed young people to travel for free on public transport across the region:

“The free travel pass was good as well because you didn’t even have to pay to get to the places.”

“Having your bus fare paid for already and stuff and not having to worry about the money made it so much easier to go out with friends, because you were like ‘ah I’ve got this I don’t need to worry about having the money for it’. I didn’t need to worry about my Pop Card if I’d lost that or something. It just made it a lot simpler.”

Young people acknowledged the typical high cost of travel in the North East, and noted the financial benefits associated with the travel pass that they received as part of HAF Plus:

“I have to get four buses every day to school, like two there and two back, so I have to pay £3 for a day ticket every single day and that’s not fun.”

“My Pop Card ran out on 31st July so I was having to pay £3 for a day ticket, so it was really helpful having a free bus pass”.

Whilst the travel passes allowed young people to reach HAF Plus activities, they also provided young people with a free mode of transport to travel across the region on any day in the school summer holidays:

“I went to a course in Gateshead library and I used the pass to get there.”

“[I used it] any time I was going out with friends or anything”.

HAF Plus app

Young people found the HAF Plus app to be more convenient for registering for activities than having to frequently attend the Metro Centre Community Hub. The app also made it easier to cancel their registration to activities, if required:

“Well, most people have phones and its easier than all going to the Metro Centre and signing up on bits of paper and then it makes it easier to cancel. Yeah, and then you’ve always got your phone on you so it’s convenient.”

Similarly, the young people felt that the app was more convenient for the HAF Plus leads than using paper-based methods:

“I think it is easier for them to have the app because they don’t have to go through loads of paperwork to see who has signed up to what.”

Access to data or Wi-Fi was required to use the HAF Plus app, and young people raised concerns for individuals who did not have digital access:

“There was like the fact you needed data or Wi-Fi for it to work, just to get on and for the vouchers to load you needed data or Wi-Fi”.

However, it was clarified that the HAF Plus leads offered digital devices to young people who did not have access to one, to avoid digital exclusion:

“They did actually have spare phones with data on them”.

Whole days of activities

Young people highlighted their enthusiasm regarding attending whole days of activities. For instance, in the summer 2024 HAF Plus programme, Northumbria University hosted a whole day of sport, nutrition, health and careers activities which was received extremely positively by the young people who attended:

“That was the best day! There was like rock climbing, cooking and there was loads of different sports on, like we went in the gym and I didn’t do this but they had like martial arts on.”

“I liked the Northumbria day as well it was really good.”

Young people appreciated that all activities were located in close proximity to one another on the day of activities at Northumbria University:

“It was a lot of variety of things in one day, so it wasn’t rushing from place to place to get there, it was like we got to do loads of things in one day with different people as a group.”

Due to the success of this activity day, young people recommended that other full days of activities are incorporated into the HAF Plus programme in future years. One suggestion included a day of skills-based activities at one central location:

“I think they should have had more skills on one day.”

“It would be good if they were grouped on one day”.

Incentives

Young people appreciated the incentives that they were offered to attend HAF Plus activities. For instance, Northumbria University offered young people who attended their offer a branded hoodie:

“We got hoodies at end of it!”

“I got a free pen from that!”

Young people were also enthusiastic about activities where they had the opportunity to win prizes:

“You also like won prizes and we also did like a computer thing whilst we were there, and it was really good.”

Theme 3: Barriers and recommendations

Young people identified a number of barriers related to their experience of the HAF Plus programme and suggested recommendations for improvements related to these elements for future programme success. These included timing clashes and food availability.

Timing clashes

Young people acknowledged that they did not attend some of the activities on offer, but noted that this was because of timing clashes rather than due to a lack of interest:

“That was the thing, a lot of them clashed or were all at the same time. I would have done a lot more if they hadn’t clashed with each other”

“I would have done a lot more if I had more time”.

“I wish I had been able to do them because they sounded like really helpful but I just didn’t have time.”

Similarly, some young people discussed that the amount of time required to travel across the region meant that they could not attend sessions which were delivered consecutively, but at different locations:

“As soon as one ended the other one was starting at the exact same time.”

“A lot of stuff this year was on the same day, so like when you wanted to do one thing you were like rushing from one to another or like leaving one early to get to the other on time.”

Although most providers were understanding and lenient about punctuality due to timing clashes, some young people left the previous session early to avoid being late to their next activity:

“It was just about being courteous, like explaining why we were late. It wasn’t like we couldn’t be bothered it was like we had a genuine reason.”

“I guess for the cookery one they were like ‘oh we’ve started already’ but they didn’t say we couldn’t take part, they let us do it, but they let us know that there were some things done already.”

“So we were at Gateshead College I think it was on Mondays for hair and beauty, and that finished at 4pm and at 4pm there was football starting at Newcastle United Foundation so we had to get from there to Newcastle and we would always be late or have to leave early.”

Young people described that they subconsciously categorised activities as being either ‘stereotypically fun’ (i.e. cinema, bowling) or ‘skills-based’. If these types of activities clashed on the timetable, they would be less likely to attend the ‘skills-based’ activity. As such, young people made recommendations regarding improved session timings to overcome potential issues with attendance:

“I think I wouldn't offer like a really stereotypically fun activity on the same day as that, maybe if you're going to put two on one day then put two skills-based ones on one day so then you're less likely to choose something else over it.”

“Yeah, maybe the option or two different skills-based ones per day so you have the option to alternate possibly and then have different ones for different weeks, so if you go to one that week you learn that and then one next week – rather than the same.”

“But you offered knife crime and finance, then they were both skills-based. You could have one in the morning and one in the afternoon and then you wouldn't be more likely to choose something else.”

Food availability

Whilst young people were satisfied with the food offer in terms of variety, they experienced barriers regarding the accessibility and availability of the food. As discussed by deliverers, the locations of the outlets where vouchers could be used which were not always near the activities that young people attended:

“Most of the food vouchers, apart from the Greggs one, could only be used in the Metro Centre or Birtley and not all of the activities were near there.”

Young people discussed the considerations they made each week to ensure that they would have food vouchers available for the outlets nearby the sessions they were attending:

“My thoughts were which days am I with people who will have the same vouchers so I don't have to go and have food on my own, but then do I have money to get food on other days where I might be doing like a busier activity where I need more energy?”

Another barrier related to the quantity of food vouchers provided to young people:

“Yeah, there were so many activities on and we got three vouchers a week, but most people were doing more than three activities a week so it was trying to find like food for every day you do activities.”

Furthermore, young people lost track of which vouchers they had already redeemed:

“I was rocking up to Greggs thinking will I be able to get a meal with this one?”

“It didn't show how much you had left so you had to keep track of which ones had what left, so it would be good if it had like how much is left on it.”

“Sometimes if you forgot to mark it as used and the new one you got sent was identical it was really confusing”.

As such, young people recommended that future iterations of the HAF Plus app indicate which food vouchers have already been redeemed:

“Even if it just had a zigzag or a star which said ‘new voucher’ or something”.

“If they’ve got no balance left on them, they could be automatically marked as used so you don’t get confused”.

“Maybe we could just label the vouchers like A, B,C,D”.

Theme 4: Perceived benefits for young people

The young people noted a range of benefits they perceived to be related to attending the HAF Plus programme: reduced boredom; new opportunities; developing life skills; increased physical activity; social opportunities.

Reduced boredom

The HAF Plus programme provided young people with the opportunity to take part in activities for free over the summer holidays, rather than staying at home, which reduced their boredom:

“It’s motivation to actually get out and do something rather than sitting at home and sleeping, you can get out and motivate yourself to do something, spend time with someone and have fun doing an activity rather than sitting at home or play games or whatever you want to do. Watching something is fine and playing something is fine, but not every day for six weeks.”

Some of the young people provided examples of what they would do in a typical school summer holiday period, without access to the HAF Plus programme:

“I’d have just slept and ate.”

“I’d have done not much at all.”

“It’s instead of sleeping in the house all day.”

Having access to the HAF Plus activities was perceived to be beneficial for young people’s mental health:

“It keeps us occupied, because you know if you’re in year 11 or year 10 and you’re getting sent homework and dread doing that, if you’ve had a hard hour of doing homework and then you have an activity after that it gets you through it a bit easier, so like it keeps you occupied especially if you’re having a bad mental health day or something, it gives you something to do to distract yourself”

New opportunities

The young people valued the free of charge opportunities that they participated in through the HAF Plus programme, many of which they had never experienced before:

“Not having to pay for the things, which sounds bad, but it’s like not everyone has the money for it. So, like loads of the activities gave people the opportunity to try different things.”

“Because its free it gives you more incentive to do it because you don’t have to pay anything.”

“Yeah it gave you the chance to do stuff and try stuff you never really would have, like I would have never gone to Grounded Kitchen if we didn’t have the vouchers and I’m really glad I went.”

Some activities sparked a new interest for the young people which they hope to continue and develop further:

“I did DJ’ing, and I’m really interested in that now, so my friend’s dad is teaching me.”

“I had never done DJ’ing before, and it was really fun. I wasn’t that good at it but it was still fun to mess around with it.”

Developing life skills

Through involvement in skills-based activities, many young people gained new knowledge and transferable skills which they could utilise in their everyday lives:

“You also learn like life skills, like we did cooking and knife crime sessions and stuff like that.”

“There was a lot more like skills and life skills-based sessions as well, like obviously the knife crime and first aid and we didn’t have a lot of that last year so I think it was good that we had more of that this year – and it was obviously like just something different.”

One young person highlighted the value of a finance-related session in the pilot phase of the HAF Plus programme, and recommended that this is reintroduced in future:

“In the pilot I went to a money session about debt and stuff and that was pretty interesting, like I actually found it eye opening. Like it gives young people more insight about their future and it was done in like a fun way.”

Increased physical activity

The HAF Plus programme enabled young people to take part in a range of physical activities over the summer holidays:

“MMA. But the guy who did it, we did like multiple things, like he showed you some boxing and kickboxing and things and it went onto a little bit of self-defence and some judo. So, it was a mix of things, but it was about being active and how to defend yourself.”

Some young people recognised that they rarely participate in physical activity, and appreciated the opportunity to adjust their lifestyle:

“I especially appreciated the sporty activities because I don’t tend to work out, especially in the summer holidays because I’m just lying in bed most of the time, so having that is just like making me feel productive, getting my hormones all happy and everything and making me happy and stuff,”

Social opportunities

Many of the young people who attended the HAF Plus programme developed new friendships over the summer holidays:

“This year there’s like four or five different people who we became close friends with who were on a lot of the activities with us.”

Young people noted that knowing their friends were attending an activity influenced them to also want to take part:

“I knew if a lot of my friends were doing one activity, then I would want to go and do it with them”.

As such, young people recommended that the HAF Plus app could indicate who has registered for each activity:

“I don’t know if this would be possible, but would it work if they could give us the names, maybe just first names, of who would be at the activities so we had an idea of who was going to be there, because that’s the original idea we had to see who else had signed up to the activity. I think it would give you a bit of an incentive to go if you knew your friends were going, especially if we don’t see or speak to each other that much it would be good”.

Qualitative Discussion

The aim of study 1 was to understand the views and experiences of HAF leads, deliverers and young people, involved in the HAF Plus programme in summer 2024. Across all participant groups, the findings demonstrate the level of complexity, across multiple organisations, required to plan, implement and deliver a successful HAF Plus programme, with a range of perceived benefits noted

for the young people involved. However, several barriers and related recommendations for future delivery are also highlighted and these are discussed below.

The HAF Plus programme in Gateshead comprised of four key elements: independent travel, meal/food vouchers, health and wellbeing activities, and safeguarding. For the core programme content, HAF Plus leads liaised with a range of local and national partners to establish a fun and engaging programme which met the needs, and piqued the interest, of the young people in the region, whilst adhering to DfE guideline and desired outcomes stipulated by the DfE related to HAF across all age ranges (GOV.UK, 2024). Whilst some relationships with delivery organisations were pre-established through collaborating on previous projects, other relationships were newly developed in 2024; such networking allowed for a wider expansion of both activity providers and food outlets across the region, in comparison to the pilot phase ([HAF Plus Pilot](#)). Strategic alignment was often a key motivator for delivery organisations' interest and involvement in the HAF Plus programme; with the ethos of many organisations aligning to the aims and objectives of HAF Plus (i.e. raising aspirations, providing new opportunities, educational activities), thereby resulting in shared goals (Long, Defeyter & Stretesky, 2022).

Trusted partnerships and reciprocal support systems were also key facilitators to the success of the HAF Plus programme, as indicated at both organisational and delivery level. As discussed by Yee, Spencer and Defeyter (2024), trust is essential in working relationships to ensure successful collaboration. In Gateshead, delivery partners were trusted to deliver their programme successfully and independently, which allowed autonomy and relieved administration pressure on the HAF Plus leads. Moreover, both deliverers and young people valued the approachable nature of the HAF Plus leads, who were readily available to support with queries when required. Where possible, some organisations reduced costs for both food and activities which allowed the HAF Plus budget to stretch further and the programme consequently to expand wider than during the pilot phase; this was particularly important in 2024 as the capacity increased significantly.

For the expanded roll-out of HAF Plus in summer 2024, young people were recruited through multiple channels including pre-established youth networks (i.e. Gateshead's Youth Council and Young Inspectors) and schools. Secondary schools were an important channel used to reach young people. As the DfE provide funding for HAF and HAF Plus mainly for young people who are eligible for FSM during term-time, school staff supported in identifying these young people and inviting HAF Plus leads into schools to conduct group assemblies. Schools framed any invitation to the programme as being a reward, to try to eliminate any potential stigma associated with the programme and FSM eligibility (Defeyter et al., 2022). However, not all schools were forthcoming with support for the HAF Plus programme, with some young people explaining that their school did not advertise the programme at all. One young person who heard about the HAF Plus programme through a pre-

established youth network highlighted that they may have thought the programme was ‘too good to be true’ if they heard about it through an alternative channel. As such, young people advocated for an ambassador programme, where individuals who have been involved with HAF Plus previously can share their views and experiences as a means of advertisement. Promisingly, this suggestion can be supported through an existing HAF Plus ambassador network set up by Northumbria University. In this network, youth HAF Plus ambassadors from across the North East can exchange knowledge and ideas and feed back to local authorities ([HAF Plus Ambassadors Scheme](#)).

In terms of food provision, young people received vouchers for a range of outlets each week. However, whilst young people were satisfied with the variety of food that was on offer, they experienced barriers regarding the accessibility and availability of the food. Indeed, the locations of the outlets where vouchers could be used were not always near the activities that young people attended. Only particular franchised outlets accepted the vouchers, and some young people struggled to differentiate whether each voucher had already been redeemed. Young people therefore recommended that future iterations of the HAF Plus app incorporate a system which differentiates used and unused food vouchers. Moreover, it was recommended by young people, and acknowledged by HAF Plus leads, that an increased number of outlets spread geographically wider across the region should be included in the programme in future.

The Gateshead offer incorporated a travel pass, allowing young people to independently access all public transport services in the region, for free, during the school summer holidays. HAF Plus leads acknowledged that whilst this provision is neither mandatory nor typical for HAF-based programmes to provide, the cost of travel can prevent young people from attending activities and experiences in the school holidays (Stretesky et al., 2020); an issue thereby eliminated through such provision the Gateshead HAF Plus model. Young people similarly acknowledged the typical high cost of travel in the region and noted that they used their travel pass frequently throughout the summer holidays, including travelling to non-HAF Plus activities.

The HAF Plus app was another key facilitator for the successful expansion of the HAF Plus programme in Gateshead in 2024. One organisation delivered HAF Plus across two local authorities in the North East, and suggested that due to its success in 2024, using the app as one centralised online registration system across other local authorities would be beneficial. HAF Plus leads similarly noted that other local authorities are interested in developing or purchasing a similar booking system. For all participant groups, the digital registration system within the HAF Plus app was deemed to be advantageous in comparison to paper-based and in-person methods that were solely used in the pilot phase. Young people appreciated the convenience of registering and cancelling their attendance at activities remotely, without having to frequently travel to the Metro Centre Community Hub or emailing the council. Importantly, the HAF Plus leads also considered digital exclusion and the digital

divide in the UK, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Watts et al., 2020). Digital exclusion was attenuated by HAF leads through allowing young people to borrow digital devices for the duration of the HAF Plus programme or to participate in HAF Plus through a fully paper-based method of registration. There may be opportunities to think about how anchor institutions can support the digital divide for this age group through recycling IT equipment, including tablets and smartphones. Whilst the app is undoubtedly the preferred tool for engagement for the booking process and communications, the deliverers noted that future iterations of the app could include further information about attendees; particularly ensuring that emergency contact details and medical information is always available.

In addition, deliverers recognised that the app HAF Plus provided the basis for a convenient, accessible way to market and advertise sessions to young people, which could be utilised more in the future. For the summer 2024 programme, deliverers were required to market their own sessions, in terms of describing the activities on offer to capture the attention of young people. However, many of the deliverers reported that despite their attempts to engage young people, attendance at some sessions remained low. Some providers delivered sessions that were an extension of those offered to school groups during term-time, which leads speculated may not have piqued the interest of young people in the school summer holidays or may have been aimed more towards the wrong age group (i.e. careers advice more suitable for older teenagers). Upon reflection, however, some deliverers acknowledged that their marketing and advertisement was perhaps too limited in 2024, which may have resulted in low attendance at their sessions. In future years, both the HAF Plus app and further opportunities to attend in-person marketing sessions with young people, earlier in advance of the summer holidays, may help to overcome such challenges. Deliverers also recognised an opportunity to network and learn about other organisations' sessions in advance of the school holiday periods where HAF Plus is delivered, and collaborate with one another to promote others' activities, with an aim to increase session attendance across the whole programme.

Nevertheless, both leads and deliverers raised concerns regarding the financial costs and wasted resources related to low session attendance. Whilst absences are not uncommon for HAF sessions (Defeyter, Stretesky & Shinwell, 2023), the costs related to planning, implementing and delivering HAF Plus sessions to extremely small groups was highlighted as being unfeasible and unsustainable, particularly for small or independent organisations. Hence, offering spaces for the general public to attend was raised as an option by deliverers, who typically provide the same sessions to community groups throughout the year, and it is notable that this was one of the suggestions made by young people in the original co-design workshops. Where this suggestion is implemented however, and it is not part of an organisation's everyday model of delivery, safeguarding protocols must be strictly followed and thorough risk assessments conducted. HAF Plus leads also recognised the importance of

removing unpopular activities from the offer, and overbooking to a higher percentage, to overcome such issues in future years of provision.

Timing clashes were also an explanation for young people failing to register for certain sessions, rather than a lack of interest. Moreover, the amount of time required to travel across the region meant that young people could sometimes not attend sessions which were delivered consecutively, but at different locations. Young people recommended that whole days of activities are incorporated into the HAF Plus programme in future years, like the day of sport and wellbeing activities delivered at Northumbria University in 2024, which was extremely positively received. Indeed, young people were enthusiastic about this programme, particularly as all activities were geographically close to one another (i.e. on the same campus) and recommended a skills-based version is delivered in the future (i.e. first aid, cooking, careers advice). Alternatively, Gateshead Council could plan future HAF Plus activities and timetable, with young people and delivery partners, to take into account some of the issues raised in this report.

Overall, all participant groups perceived the HAF Plus programme as being associated with a range of positive benefits for young people and their families. The HAF Plus programme reduced boredom in the school holidays and provided young people with new experiences which they may otherwise not have encountered, including opportunities for socialisation, physical activity and developing transferable life skills (Long, Stretesky & Defeyter, 2022). The HAF Plus leads were mindful to ensure that some activities were also accessible to the general public, so that young people could return to school and discuss their experiences with others, without being identified as attending HAF Plus; to eliminate any potential stigma associated with the programme (Defeyter et al., 2022). Importantly, the school holidays can place a significant financial burden on families, due to increased costs of food and activities. The HAF Plus programme was noted, by all groups in this evaluation, to benefit families financially with leads estimating **an approximate saving of £400 per child** if they took part in multiple activities, and utilised their travel pass across the region, during summer 2024.

3. Study 2 (Surveys)

Methods

Design and Participants

This study adopted a self-completion, cross-sectional online survey design and used non-probability purposive sampling to collect data from young people and parents/carers attending HAF Plus across Gateshead. The surveys were co-developed with HAF leads at Gateshead Council, the HDRC at Gateshead Council, parents/carers and young people. The research team worked with Gateshead Council to obtain informed consent from young people and parents/carers during the HAF Plus registration phase. Gateshead Council disseminated the link to the online survey to young people, whose parents/carers had provided parental consent, via the HAF Plus app. The parent/carer survey was disseminated via Gateshead Council, to parents/carers through email, SMS and printed letters which included the links and QR codes for the surveys. When young people and parent/carers accessed the online survey and consented to participate, the online system automatically generated each individual with a participant number. However, participants were removed from the database if they did not subsequently answer any survey questions.

Demographic information was provided by 52 young people who identified as male ($n=23$), female ($n=27$) or preferred not to say ($n=2$), and were aged between 12 and 16 years old. Young people identified as White ($n=36$), Black ($n=1$), Asian ($n=3$), other ($n=11$) or did not know ($n=1$).

Demographic information was also provided by 44 parents/carers who identified as male ($n=5$) and female ($n=38$) or other ($n=1$) and were aged between 29 and 71 years old. Parents/carers identified as White ($n=36$), Black ($n=2$), mixed ($n=1$), other ($n=2$) or preferred not to say ($n=2$).

Online Surveys

The parent/carer survey and young person's surveys were hosted on Qualtrics and were accessible on a computer, tablet or smartphone. The surveys firstly asked for demographic information (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity, postcode). The young person's survey included 34 questions about HAF Plus, and the parent/carer survey included 31 questions about HAF Plus. Whilst closed questions were primarily included, both surveys offered participants the opportunity to provide qualitative information if they had anything to add about their experiences of the HAF Plus programme, for example: "If you would like to add any comments about your experience of HAF Plus in summer 2024, please write your response in the text box below". In addition, if parents/carers indicated that they supported their child in travelling to a HAF Plus activity, or provided their child with a packed lunch or money to spend on food, they were asked write an accompanying qualitative explanation for further clarity (i.e. a follow-up qualitative question was presented on the survey). Each survey took approximately 25 minutes to complete. The surveys were active between 14th August and 30th September 2024. All young people

and parents/carers were given the opportunity to enter a prize draw at the end of the survey, to win a £50 shopping voucher, as a thank you for their participation.

Procedure

For both the parent/carer and young person's surveys, draft surveys were sent to the HAF leads at Gateshead Council, the HDRC at Gateshead Council, parents/carers and young people for feedback. Following several subsequent iterations, the surveys were stressed tested by the research team to eliminate system faults. The survey links and QR codes were emailed to the HAF leads at Gateshead Council for dissemination via the app, email, SMS and paper letters.

On the first page of each survey, an information sheet and consent form were presented. For the young person's survey, these forms contained the same information that was presented to parents/carers during the HAF Plus registration process. If participants did not consent to take part, they were automatically referred to the end of the survey. Participants were asked to provide a memorable codeword for anonymity and to use if they wished to withdraw their anonymous data. Both surveys took approximately 25 minutes for participants to complete. Participants in each survey were offered the opportunity to provide their email address to be entered into a prize draw to win a £50 shopping voucher, as a thank you for their participation. A debrief sheet was presented on the last page of each survey, which outlined the purpose of the study, explained participants' right to withdraw, and provided researcher contact information.

Data Analysis

Responses from closed questions were coded and analysed using SPSS version 28 and are presented as descriptive statistics and frequency tables. For open ended questions, data were coded and collated to form common categories relating to young people's and parents'/carers' experiences of HAF Plus.

Results

For organisational purposes, the data from the young person's survey and the parent/carer survey will be presented separately.

Young Person's Survey

The implementation and roll out of HAF Plus by Gateshead Council in 2024 resulted in a significant increase in the number of young people attending HAF Plus for the first time. As such, the research team used this opportunity to ask these young people what they would have been doing during the summer school holiday had HAF Plus not been available. Participants were able to select more than one response. Overall, young people reported that, without HAF Plus, they would have spent most of their time during the school summer holiday period at home ($n=34$), hanging out in the town centre or shopping centre ($n=22$), going to a friend's house ($n=24$), participating in cultural activities (e.g.

visiting the Baltic, the Centre for Life etc., ($n=2$), and engaging in activities relevant to improving their CV ($n=6$). Analysis of open-ended questions showed that a few young people would have gone to the cinema ($n=2$) or spent time drawing and sketching ($n=2$). It is most striking that very few young people would have engaged with arts and cultural organisations, organised sports/physical activities, or the regions' other assets (e.g. city parks, nature reserves) during the school holiday period, when HAF Plus was not available to them. The implementation and roll out of HAF Plus in 2024, enabled young people to try activities that they had not done before, with **nearly 77% of young people ($n=52$) reporting that HAF Plus allowed them to try new activities that they had not done before** (Table 4), with average attendance being six sessions, and some young people attending up to 16 sessions across the summer holiday period ($n=48$).

Table 4. The percentage of young people who agreed that HAF Plus enabled them to try new activities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat disagree	2	3.8	4.3	4.3
	Neither disagree nor agree	5	9.6	10.6	14.9
	Somewhat agree	5	9.6	10.6	25.5
	Agree	17	32.7	36.2	61.7
	Strongly Agree	18	34.6	38.3	100.0
	Total	47	90.4	100.0	
Missing	System	5	9.6		
Total		52	100.0		

We then proceeded to ask young people a range of questions about the HAF Plus provision they had attended in 2024. Overall, **71% of young people rated the range of HAF Plus activities as somewhat good to very good.** This is a very promising finding, given that this is the first year that Gateshead Council have rolled out the HAF Plus programme (Table 5).

Table 5. Young people’s ratings of the activities available for HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat poor	3	5.8	6.4	6.4
	Neutral	7	13.5	14.9	21.3
	Somewhat good	5	9.6	10.6	31.9
	Good	12	23.1	25.5	57.4
	Very good	20	38.5	42.6	100.0
	Total	47	90.4	100.0	
Missing	System	5	9.6		
Total		52	100.0		

Cultural and arts activities

Young people were asked to report how they would rate the cultural and arts activities that were on offer as part of HAF Plus, using a scale of 1-7, with 1 being very poor and 7 being very good. As shown in Table 6, almost 58% of young people rated the arts and cultural activities provided as somewhat good to very good, with **only 1.9% of young people rating the offer as poor**.

Table 6. Young people’s ratings of the art and cultural activities provided as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Poor	1	1.9	2.2	2.2
	Neutral	15	28.8	32.6	34.8
	Somewhat good	8	15.4	17.4	52.2
	Good	15	28.8	32.6	84.8
	Very good	7	13.5	15.2	100.0
	Total	46	88.5	100.0	
Missing	System	6	11.5		
Total		52	100.0		

In addition, young people rated whether attending HAF Plus allowed them to take part in new cultural and arts activities and experiences; using a scale of 1-7, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. As shown in Table 7, **50% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that participating in HAF Plus had allowed them to partake in new activities**.

Table 7. The percentage of young people agreeing that HAF Plus enabled them to take part in new arts and cultural activities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	3.8	4.3	4.3
	Somewhat disagree	1	1.9	2.2	6.5
	Neither agree nor disagree	17	32.7	37.0	43.5
	Somewhat agree	9	17.3	19.6	63.0
	Agree	10	19.2	21.7	84.8
	Strongly agree	7	13.5	15.2	100.0
	Total	46	88.5	100.0	
Missing	System	6	11.5		
Total		52	100.0		

Finally, we asked young people whether they enjoyed the cultural and arts activities on offer as part of HAF Plus. Thirty-six percent of young people enjoyed the arts and cultural activities, but as shown in Table 8, 30% of young people decided not to take part in these activities. Further research, involving young people, is required to explore the reasons behind this result. Given the rating of the activities provided in Table 6, this may be driven by a mix of factors (e.g. offer, availability, timing).

Table 8. Young people’s ratings of how much they enjoyed the cultural and arts activities on offer.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all	1	1.9	2.2	2.2
	Very little	2	3.8	4.3	6.5
	Neutral	8	15.4	17.4	23.9
	Moderately	8	15.4	17.4	41.3
	Very much	6	11.5	13.0	54.3
	Extremely	5	9.6	10.9	65.2
	N/A - I did not take part in any cultural or arts activities	16	30.8	34.8	100.0
	Total	46	88.5	100.0	
Missing	System	6	11.5		
Total		52	100.0		

Physical activities

Young people provided data on whether they thought that attending HAF Plus had supported them to engage in more physical activities over the school summer holidays than they would have done without the HAF Plus programme. As shown in Table 9, **over 65% of young people felt that HAF Plus had supported them to engage in more physical activities than otherwise.**

Table 9. Percentage of young people who agreed that HAF Plus supported their engagement with physical activity.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat disagree	5	9.6	10.9	10.9
	Neither agree nor disagree	7	13.5	15.2	26.1
	Somewhat agree	7	13.5	15.2	41.3
	Agree	12	23.1	26.1	67.4
	Strongly agree	15	28.8	32.6	100.0
	Total	46	88.5	100.0	
Missing	System	6	11.5		
Total		52	100.0		

The survey also asked young people to rate the physical activities on offer as part of HAF Plus (see Table 10). The results show that **the majority of young people (65%) thought that the physical activities were somewhat good to very good**; with a likewise, high level of enjoyment of these physical activities (see Table 11).

Table 10. Young people’s ratings of the physical activities offered as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	11	21.2	23.9	23.9
	Somewhat good	2	3.8	4.3	28.3
	Good	18	34.6	39.1	67.4
	Very good	14	26.9	30.4	97.8
	N/A - I did not take part in any physical activities	1	1.9	2.2	100.0
	Total	46	88.5	100.0	
Missing	System	6	11.5		
Total		52	100.0		

Table 11. Young people’s ratings for how much they enjoyed the physical activities on offer as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Slightly	1	1.9	2.2	2.2
	Neutral	10	19.2	21.7	23.9
	Moderately	12	23.1	26.1	50.0
	Very much	9	17.3	19.6	69.6
	Extremely	11	21.2	23.9	93.5
	N/A - I did not take part in any physical activities as part of HAF Plus	3	5.8	6.5	100.0
	Total	46	88.5	100.0	
Missing	System	6	11.5		
Total		52	100.0		

Food and food-related activities

Research has shown that HAF can act as a nutritional safety net for children during the school summer holidays (Mann et al., 2021; Crilley et al., 2022; Round et al., 2022). However, HAF Plus operates using a more flexible model where young people have added choice and autonomy over activities. Thus, it was important to explore how food, and food-related activities, were received by young people. Fifty percent of young people agreed that HAF Plus enabled them to learn food-related skills and knowledge to prepare nutritious meals, although 33% of young people were ambivalent, suggesting that further work is required (see Table 12).

Table 12. The percentage of young people who agreed that HAF Plus enabled them to learn food-related skills and knowledge to prepare nutritious meals.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	1.9	2.2	2.2
	Somewhat disagree	1	1.9	2.2	4.4
	Neither agree nor disagree	17	32.7	37.8	42.2
	Somewhat agree	4	7.7	8.9	51.1
	Agree	10	19.2	22.2	73.3
	Strongly agree	12	23.1	26.7	100.0
	Total	45	86.5	100.0	

Missing	System	7	13.5		
Total		52	100.0		

Table 13 shows that 58% of young people rated the food-related activities as being somewhat good to very good, suggesting that many young people enjoyed the food-related activities. This is an encouraging finding and anecdotal evidence collected by the council suggests that, with small modifications, this activity could not only prove popular (see Table 14) but also provide a strong foundation to delivering food and nutrition events. Based on prior research that has shown practical, hands-on sessions to provide the best means of delivering food education to children and young people in the HAF programme (Round et al., 2024), the council ensured that all sessions (e.g. baking stotties with the baker from Big River Bakery; cooking lunch with the executive chef from Chartwells at Northumbria University) were practical sessions in which young people were actually preparing, cooking, and eating the food that they had made.

Table 13. Young people’s ratings of the food-related activities on offer as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	15	28.8	33.3	33.3
	Somewhat good	5	9.6	11.1	44.4
	Good	10	19.2	22.2	66.7
	Very good	15	28.8	33.3	100.0
	Total	45	86.5	100.0	
Missing	System	7	13.5		
Total		52	100.0		

Only 19% of young people, who responded to the survey did not take part in food-related activities (see Table 14), despite these activities being optional. Combined with the finding that over 50% of young people stated that they enjoyed these activities, these two findings are promising and suggest very strong foundations for improvement.

Table 14. Young people’s rating of how much they enjoyed the food-related activities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	8	15.4	17.8	17.8
	Moderately	5	9.6	11.1	28.9
	Very much	6	11.5	13.3	42.2
	Extremely	16	30.8	35.6	77.8
	N/A - I did not take part in any food-related activities	10	19.2	22.2	100.0
	Total	45	86.5	100.0	
Missing	System	7	13.5		
Total		52	100.0		

In terms of health and wellbeing information, we explored whether young people received or had access to such information through digital sources and/or speaking to health professionals as part of HAF Plus. As shown in Table 15, just under 25% of young people reported that they had good access to such information. Given that Gateshead Council used an app for registrations and notifications, we recommend that the council considers ways in which to partner with local NHS services, such as the NHS Healthier Together website and app that provides health and wellbeing information and signposting to local services. As Healthier Together is a national NHS service, this may also be of interest to other local authorities as all of the information provided is quality assured.

Table 15. Percentage of young people who received or accessed health information through HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	12	23.1	27.9	27.9
	No	15	28.8	34.9	62.8
	Don't know	16	30.8	37.2	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

As part of the HAF Plus offer, Northumbria University provided health and wellbeing education (e.g. alcohol, vaping, wellbeing, etc), using state of the art clinical simulation and virtual reality, within the Community Hub located in the Metro Centre. This was supported by other first aid and health events across the borough as part of the HAF Plus offer. As show in Table 16, approximately 30% of young people reported that they had a greater awareness of health-related issues (e.g. alcohol, vaping, wellbeing, etc) through HAF Plus participation. This is an area that requires further exploration in terms of utilising anchor institutions and local assets. The number of young people visiting the Community Hub in the Metro Centre was low. as the Community Hub is not located on any of the main thoroughfares. In addition, the HAF Plus app resulted in young people being able to access and book sessions online and remotely, which reduced the necessity for a physical presence.

Table 16. The percentage of young people reporting that they had a greater awareness of health-related issues through participation in HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat disagree	1	1.9	2.3	2.3
	Neither agree nor disagree	12	23.1	27.9	30.2
	Somewhat agree	4	7.7	9.3	39.5
	Agree	11	21.2	25.6	65.1
	Strongly agree	8	15.4	18.6	83.7
	N/A - I did not receive or access any health and wellbeing information	7	13.5	16.3	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

The HAF Plus programme, like the HAF programme, provides young people with meals that should comply to School Food Standards. This has often proved challenging for HAF clubs, many of whom are delivered through community organisations and are not always experienced in cooking to School Food Standards. Furthermore, compliance is often compounded by reliance on surplus or donated food. For HAF Plus, all the food options provided were tested, before inclusion in the offer, in terms of adherence to School Food Standards by Dr Iain Brownlee, a nutritional scientist at Northumbria University, who has previously worked on researching school meal programmes and HAF food provision. Ensuring that food options met School Food Standards, alongside the non-reliance on surplus or donated food, enabled Gateshead Council to have greater control over the food offered. In

addition, using local restaurants and food outlets supported young people in how to choose healthier options within their local food environment. The food was well received, with 55% of young people rating the food as somewhat good to very good (Table 17).

Table 17. Young people’s rating on how much they liked the meals/food provided as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very poor	1	1.9	2.3	2.3
	Poor	1	1.9	2.3	4.7
	Somewhat poor	2	3.8	4.7	9.3
	Neutral	10	19.2	23.3	32.6
	Somewhat good	5	9.6	11.6	44.2
	Good	13	25.0	30.2	74.4
	Very good	11	21.2	25.6	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

Over 61% of young people thought that the food provided within the HAF Plus programme was nutritious (see Table 18), and nearly **60% of young people reported that the food offered accommodated a range of different dietary/taste preferences** (see Table 19).

Table 18. Young people’s ratings on whether the food as part of HAF Plus was nutritious.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat disagree	1	1.9	2.3	2.3
	Neutral	9	17.3	20.9	23.3
	Somewhat agree	5	9.6	11.6	34.9
	Agree	11	21.2	25.6	60.5
	Strongly agree	16	30.8	37.2	97.7
	N/A - I did not access the food offered as part of HAF Plus	1	1.9	2.3	100.0
		Total	43	82.7	100.0
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

Table 19. The percentage of young people who reported that the food offered accommodated a range of dietary/taste preferences.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	31	59.6	72.1	72.1
	No	3	5.8	7.0	79.1
	Don't know	9	17.3	20.9	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

Prior research on HAF has shown that socialisation and feelings of safety are important factors in terms of supporting attendance and wellbeing (Stretesky et al., 2020). We anticipated that these factors would be important in HAF Plus, especially as young people were provided with a free, independent travel pass across the entire holiday period. We asked young people how safe they felt whilst attending and travelling to their chosen HAF activities. **Over 77% of young people felt somewhat safe to very safe whilst participating in HAF Plus, with 50% of these young people reporting that they felt very safe** (see Table 20).

Table 20. Young people’s ratings of how safe they felt whilst participating in HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither safe nor unsafe	3	5.8	7.0	7.0
	Somewhat safe	3	5.8	7.0	14.0
	Safe	11	21.2	25.6	39.5
	Very safe	26	50.0	60.5	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

In terms of socialisation, we asked whether HAF Plus had provided young people with opportunities to meet up with friends and to make new friends. As shown in Table 21, **nearly 75% of young people reported that HAF Plus provided them with opportunities to meet up with friends and to make new friends.**

Table 21. Percentage of young people who agreed that HAF Plus provided them with opportunities to meet up with friends and to make new friends.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	1.9	2.3	2.3
	Neither agree nor disagree	8	15.4	18.6	20.9
	Somewhat agree	1	1.9	2.3	23.3
	Agree	12	23.1	27.9	51.2
	Strongly agree	21	40.4	48.8	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

Gateshead is a diverse borough, with a town centre, the Metro Centre, and a vast peri-rural and rural footprint. To evaluate the effectiveness of the travel element of HAF Plus, we asked young people about how easy it was to travel to HAF Plus activities. Table 22 shows that the majority of young people (57%) found travelling to the activities to be somewhat to very easy. Analyses of the open-ended question in the survey showed that for those young people who experienced a travel-related barrier, the difficulty was mainly related to finding the location of the activity, suggesting that further detail on venues is required in the HAF Plus app.

Table 22. Young people’s ratings on how easy it was to travel to HAF Plus activities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Difficult	1	1.9	2.3	2.3
	Somewhat difficult	2	3.8	4.7	7.0
	Neither easy nor difficult	10	19.2	23.3	30.2
	Somewhat east	5	9.6	11.6	41.9
	Easy	14	26.9	32.6	74.4
	Very easy	11	21.2	25.6	100.0
	Total	43	82.7	100.0	
Missing	System	9	17.3		
Total		52	100.0		

Finally, we asked young people for some overall feedback on the HAF Plus programme. Firstly, we asked young people whether HAF Plus participation had prepared them for returning to school in the

autumn term. Approximately 40% of young people reported that HAF Plus had supported them in preparing to go back to school, with 21% neither agreeing nor disagreeing (Table 23).

Table 23. The percentage of young people who agreed that HAF Plus prepared them for returning to school for the autumn term.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	1.9	2.4	2.4
	Disagree	3	5.8	7.1	9.5
	Somewhat disagree	6	11.5	14.3	23.8
	Neither agree nor disagree	11	21.2	26.2	50.0
	Somewhat agree	9	17.3	21.4	71.4
	Agree	5	9.6	11.9	83.3
	Strongly agree	7	13.5	16.7	100.0
	Total	42	80.8	100.0	
Missing	System	10	19.2		
Total		52	100.0		

We also asked young people about how satisfied they were with the overall HAF Plus programme.

Over 73% of young people were somewhat satisfied to extremely satisfied with HAF Plus in 2024. An excellent finding for the first year in which HAF Plus has been rolled out across Gateshead (Table 24).

Table 24. Young people’s overall satisfaction rating of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	4	7.7	9.5	9.5
	Somewhat satisfied	5	9.6	11.9	21.4
	Satisfied	21	40.4	50.0	71.4
	Extremely satisfied	12	23.1	28.6	100.0
	Total	42	80.8	100.0	
Missing	System	10	19.2		
Total		52	100.0		

Parent/Carer Survey

We collected demographic information for parents/carers through a separate survey (see methods; page 51). As some households had more than one teenager living in the household, we asked parents/carers to complete the survey in relation to their eldest child who attended HAF Plus in 2024. Table 25 provides data on the number of 11–16-year-olds living in parent/carers households and Table 26 provides detail on their relationship to the eldest child, participating in HAF Plus, living in their household.

Table 25. The number of 11–16-year-olds living in participating parent/carers households.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	2.2	2.2	2.2
0	1	2.2	2.2	4.4
1	37	82.2	82.2	86.7
2	6	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	45	100.0	100.0	

Table 26. Parent/carers relationship to the eldest child, living in the parent/carers household, who attended HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Mother	32	71.1	72.7	72.7
	Father	5	11.1	11.4	84.1
	Grandmother	2	4.4	4.5	88.6
	Other family member	1	2.2	2.3	90.9
	Other (Please state)	3	6.7	6.8	97.7
	Prefer not to say	1	2.2	2.3	100.0
	Total	44	97.8	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.2		
Total		45	100.0		

We then asked parents/carers questions about what their young person, who attended HAF, would have been doing if HAF Plus had not been available over the school summer holidays.

Physical activity

Parent/carers were asked whether HAF Plus had enabled their child to engage in more physical activity over the summer holidays than they otherwise would have. As shown in Table 27, **nearly**

72% of parents/carers agreed that HAF Plus had increased their child’s participation in physical activities, with 42% strongly agreeing.

Table 27. Percentage of parents/carers who agreed that HAF Plus resulted in their child engaging in increased physical activity.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	4.4	4.8	4.8
	Disagree	1	2.2	2.4	7.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	3	6.7	7.1	14.3
	Somewhat agree	5	11.1	11.9	26.2
	Agree	8	17.8	19.0	45.2
	Strongly agree	19	42.2	45.2	90.5
	Don't know	1	2.2	2.4	92.9
	N/A - my child did not attend any physical activities	3	6.7	7.1	100.0
	Total	42	93.3	100.0	
Missing	System	3	6.7		
Total		45	100.0		

Over 80% of parents/carers rated the provision of physical activities as somewhat good to very good, with approximately 47% of parents/carers rating the physical activities as very good (see Table 28).

Table 28. Parents’/carers’ ratings of the physical activities offered as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	2	4.4	4.8	4.8
	Somewhat good	3	6.7	7.1	11.9
	Good	12	26.7	28.6	40.5
	Very good	21	46.7	50.0	90.5
	Don't know	4	8.9	9.5	100.0
	Total	42	93.3	100.0	
Missing	System	3	6.7		
Total		45	100.0		

Cultural and arts activities

We sought parents'/carers' views regarding the cultural and arts activities offered as part of the HAF Plus programme. Nearly 58% of parents/carers reported that HAF Plus had allowed their child to participate in new cultural and arts activities and experiences (see Table 29), with around 67% of parents/carers rating these activities as somewhat good to very good (see Table 30).

Table 29. Parents'/carers' views on whether HAF Plus allowed their child to participate in new cultural/arts activities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	2.2	2.4	2.4
	Disagree	1	2.2	2.4	4.8
	Somewhat disagree	1	2.2	2.4	7.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	4	8.9	9.5	16.7
	Somewhat agree	4	8.9	9.5	26.2
	Agree	8	17.8	19.0	45.2
	Strongly agree	14	31.1	33.3	78.6
	Don't know	1	2.2	2.4	81.0
	N/A - my child did not take part in any cultural and arts activities	8	17.8	19.0	100.0
	Total	42	93.3	100.0	
Missing	System	3	6.7		
Total		45	100.0		

Table 30. Parent/carers ratings of the cultural and arts activities offered as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	3	6.7	7.3	7.3
	Somewhat good	2	4.4	4.9	12.2
	Good	15	33.3	36.6	48.8
	Very good	13	28.9	31.7	80.5
	Don't know	8	17.8	19.5	100.0
	Total	41	91.1	100.0	
Missing	System	4	8.9		
Total		45	100.0		

Food-related activities

Parents/carers were asked whether HAF Plus allowed their child to learn food-related skills and knowledge that they could use to prepare nutritious meals. Forty-seven percent of parents/carers agreed that HAF Plus had allowed their child to gain knowledge and skills in this area, with only around 4% of parents/carers disagreeing (Table 31).

Table 31. The percentage of parents/carers agreeing that HAF Plus allowed their child to learn food-related skills and knowledge.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	2.2	2.4	2.4
	Somewhat disagree	1	2.2	2.4	4.9
	Neither agree nor disagree	7	15.6	17.1	22.0
	Somewhat agree	3	6.7	7.3	29.3
	Agree	6	13.3	14.6	43.9
	Strongly agree	12	26.7	29.3	73.2
	Don't know	1	2.2	2.4	75.6
	N/A - my child did not take part in any food-related activities	10	22.2	24.4	100.0
	Total	41	91.1	100.0	
Missing	System	4	8.9		
Total		45	100.0		

Approximately 55% of parents/carer rated the food-related activities as somewhat good to very good, with no parents/carers rating this provision as poor (see Table 32).

Table 32. Parents/carers rating of the food-related activities offered as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	3	6.7	7.3	7.3
	Somewhat good	2	4.4	4.9	12.2
	Good	6	13.3	14.6	26.8
	Very good	17	37.8	41.5	68.3
	Don't know	13	28.9	31.7	100.0
	Total	41	91.1	100.0	
Missing	System	4	8.9		
Total		45	100.0		

In looking at health and wellbeing information, approximately 35% of parents/carers agreed that their child either received or had access to health information (Table 33), and 38% agreed that their child had greater awareness of health-related issues (e.g. vaping, alcohol, etc) (Table 34). These percentages are similar to the self-reported data from young people in the young person’s survey and this is an area of HAF Plus that requires further co-design.

Table 33. Percentage of parents/carers who agreed that their child received or had access to health information as part of HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	16	35.6	43.2	43.2
	No	10	22.2	27.0	70.3
	Don't know	11	24.4	29.7	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

Table 34. Percentage of parent/carers who agreed that HAF Plus increased their child’s awareness of health-related issues.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither agree nor disagree	5	11.1	13.5	13.5
	Somewhat agree	6	13.3	16.2	29.7
	Agree	5	11.1	13.5	43.2
	Strongly agree	6	13.3	16.2	59.5
	Don't know	3	6.7	8.1	67.6
	N/A - my child did not access any health-related information	12	26.7	32.4	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

Food provision

Over 75% of parents/carers reported that it was somewhat easy (8.9%) to very easy (54%) for their child to access the food on offer as part of HAF Plus (see Table 35); and nearly 69% of parents/carers rated the food as nutritious (see Table 36).

Table 35. Parents’/carers’ ratings of how easy it was for their child to access the food on offer at HAF Plus.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat easy	4	8.9	10.8	10.8
	Easy	10	22.2	27.0	37.8
	Very easy	20	44.4	54.1	91.9
	Don't know	3	6.7	8.1	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

Table 36. The percentage of parents/carers who agreed the food offered at HAF Plus was nutritious.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither agree nor disagree	2	4.4	5.4	5.4
	Somewhat agree	2	4.4	5.4	10.8
	Agree	14	31.1	37.8	48.6
	Strongly agree	15	33.3	40.5	89.2
	Don't know	4	8.9	10.8	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

We also asked parents/carers whether they provided their child with a packed lunch or money to purchase food on days they took part in HAF Plus. Only 13% of parents/carers reported that they provided their child with a packed lunch or money for food (Table 37).

Table 37. The percentage of parents/carers providing their child with a packed lunch or money to purchase food.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	6	13.3	16.2	16.2
	No	31	68.9	83.8	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

Transport

The majority of parent/carers (75%) reported that it was easy for their child to use the free transport offer to travel to HAF Plus activities, with over 50% reporting that this was very easy (see Table 38).

Table 38. Parents’/carers’ ratings of how easy it was for their child to travel to HAF Plus activities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very difficult	1	2.2	2.7	2.7
	Somewhat difficult	1	2.2	2.7	5.4
	Neither easy nor difficult	1	2.2	2.7	8.1
	Somewhat easy	4	8.9	10.8	18.9
	Easy	7	15.6	18.9	37.8
	Very easy	23	51.1	62.2	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

Whilst most parents/carers reported that their child used the independent travel scheme to travel to HAF Plus activities, some parents/carers (18%) received help from a friend or family member to enable their child to attend an activity (see Table 39).

Table 39. The percentage of parents/carers who received help from a friend or family member for getting their child to an activity.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	8	17.8	21.6	21.6
	No	29	64.4	78.4	100.0
	Total	37	82.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	17.8		
Total		45	100.0		

Finally, we sought overall parent/carer feedback on the HAF Plus programme. **Over 73% parents/carers reported that HAF Plus had allowed their child to try new activities** (see Table 40).

Table 40. The percentage of parents/carers who reported that HAF Plus allowed their child to try a new activity.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat agree	4	8.9	11.1	11.1
	Agree	7	15.6	19.4	30.6
	Strongly agree	22	48.9	61.1	91.7
	N/A	3	6.7	8.3	100.0
	Total	36	80.0	100.0	
Missing	System	9	20.0		
Total		45	100.0		

Overall, 73% parents/carers rated HAF Plus as a fun and engaging programme for their child (see Table 41).

Table 41. The percentage of parents/carers who agreed that HAF Plus was a fun and engaging programme for their child.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither agree nor disagree	1	2.2	2.8	2.8
	Somewhat agree	1	2.2	2.8	5.6
	Agree	15	33.3	41.7	47.2
	Strongly agree	17	37.8	47.2	94.4
	Don't know	2	4.4	5.6	100.0
	Total	36	80.0	100.0	
Missing	System	9	20.0		
Total		45	100.0		

Over 57% parent/carers also reported that HAF Plus improved their child's self-esteem (see Table 42), and over 53% parents/carers thought that HAF Plus supported their child's return to school in the autumn term (see Table 43).

Table 42. The percentage of parents/carers who agreed that HAF Plus improved their child’s self-esteem.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	2.2	2.8	2.8
	Somewhat disagree	1	2.2	2.8	5.6
	Neither agree nor disagree	5	11.1	13.9	19.4
	Somewhat agree	5	11.1	13.9	33.3
	Agree	11	24.4	30.6	63.9
	Strongly agree	10	22.2	27.8	91.7
	Don't know	2	4.4	5.6	97.2
	N/A	1	2.2	2.8	100.0
	Total	36	80.0	100.0	
Missing	System	9	20.0		
Total		45	100.0		

Table 43. The percentage of parent/carers who agreed that HAF Plus prepared their child for their return to school in September.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	2.2	2.8	2.8
	Neither agree nor disagree	9	20.0	25.0	27.8
	Somewhat agree	3	6.7	8.3	36.1
	Agree	14	31.1	38.9	75.0
	Strongly agree	7	15.6	19.4	94.4
	Don't know	2	4.4	5.6	100.0
	Total	36	80.0	100.0	
Missing	System	9	20.0		
Total		45	100.0		

Best-Worst Scaling: Parent/Carer and Young Person's Surveys

We also conducted a Best-Worst Scaling (BWS) using information obtained from the young person's survey and parent/carers survey. BWS is a survey-based method designed to study and quantify individual choices (i.e. measure preferences among multiple options). We grouped the attributes of HAF Plus into seven categories (see Table 44). In the BWS task, participants were presented with seven sets of four items and asked to select the "best" (most preferred or important) and the "worst" (least preferred or important) within each set. Hence, the selection process is repeated across multiple choice sets (in our case seven), enabling us to infer individual preferences for each item based on the responses.

Table 44. HAF Plus attributes for BWS.

#	Attributes
1	Physical activities
2	Food-related activities
3	Cultural activities/experiences (i.e. arts, theatre, BALTIC, Sage (Glass House))
4	Health and wellbeing information
5	Food/meals
6	Socialisation
7	Travelling

Louviere et al., (2015) demonstrate that summarising standard 'best and worst' data can be achieved by calculating a straightforward scale. This is done by subtracting the 'worst' count for each attribute (i.e., the total number of times an attribute is selected as 'worst') from the 'best' count for that attribute (i.e., the total number of times an attribute is selected as 'best').

Table 45, Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the results of the BWS analysis. Positive (negative) scores associated to attributes indicate that the attributes are viewed favourably (unfavourably) relative to others. Results indicate that both young people and parents/carers value socialisation as the most preferred characteristic of HAF Plus, followed by food/meals and physical activities. Young people and parents/carers coincide in this ranking, although parents/carers value relatively more socialisation than young people. Travelling and cultural activities/experiences are the two least valued activities by young people. However, parents/carers rank travelling as their 4th preferred characteristic of HAF Plus and place food-related activities as their 6th preferred characteristic.

Table 45. BWS scores and ranking for HAF Plus attributes (young people and parents/carers).

#	HAF Plus Attributes	BWS score: young people	BWS score: parents/carers	BWS ranking: young people	BWS ranking: parents/carers
6	Socialisation	73	104	1	1
5	Food/meals	44	39	2	2
1	Physical activities	40	16	3	3
2	Food-related activities	-7	-36	4	6
4	Health and wellbeing information	-41	-27	5	5
7	Travelling	-52	-16	6	4
3	Cultural activities/experiences (i.e. arts, theatre, BALTIC, Sage (Glass House))	-55	-42	7	7

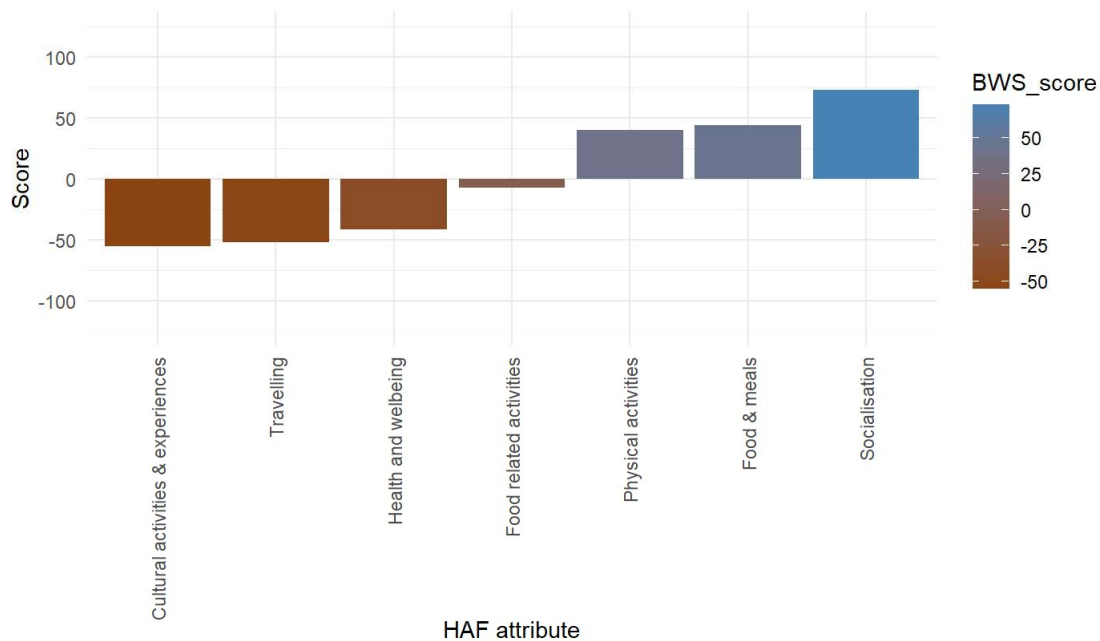


Figure 3. BWS scores - HAF Plus attributes (Young People)

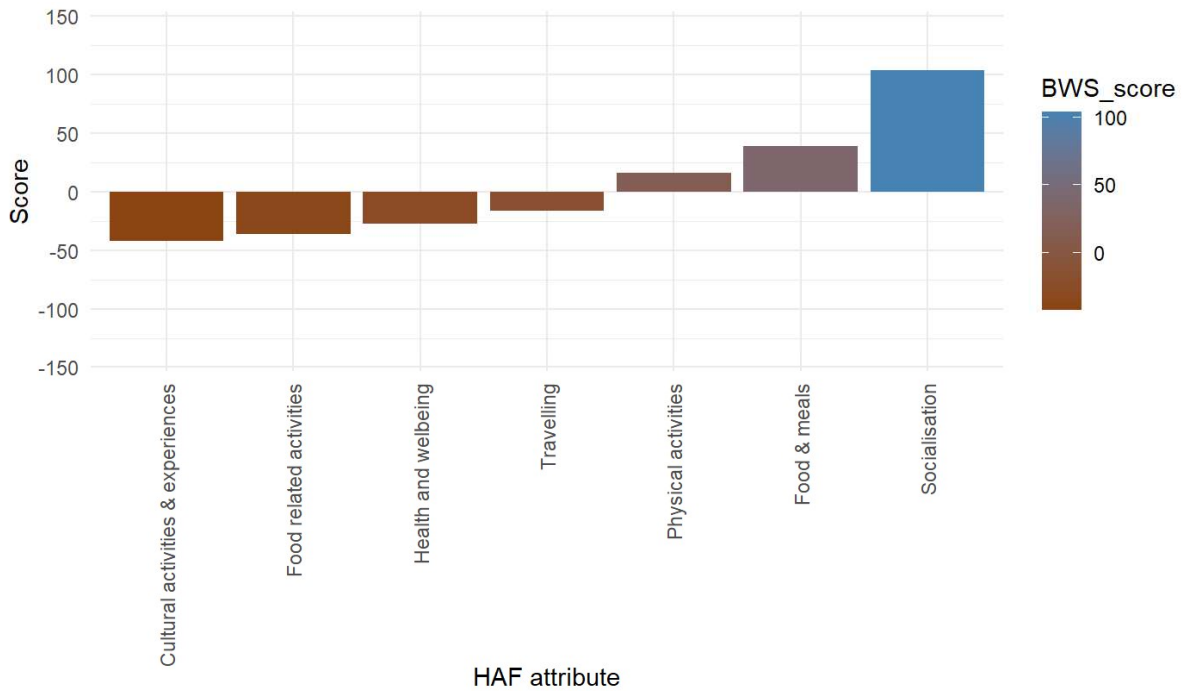


Figure 4. BWS scores - HAF Plus attributes (Parents/Carers)

Whilst this method provides detail to Gateshead Council on parents' and young people's rank order of HAF attributes, the findings must be used with caution. These findings show what attributes of the programme are valued, but also highlight areas that require improvement. Some of the lesser valued attributes are key to health and wellbeing and careful, yet innovative, adjustments may help to increase the perceived value of these activities. For example, food-related activities could be incorporated into meals by supporting young people in making their own meals, incorporating further experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Round et al., 2024). However, given the popularity of the cinema tickets (as reported in management information data from the HAF Plus app), yet the low rating of cultural activities, further work may be required on how these activities are categorised and labelled within future surveys. Thus, whilst useful, we suggest that these findings are treated with a degree of caution.

4. General Discussion

The HAF Plus programme was first piloted in Gateshead in 2023 and based on this successful pilot, the full programme was subsequently rolled out in 2024. The management information (MI) data collected by the council shows a large increase in the number of young people attending HAF Plus: an increase from 40 young people in the summer of 2023 to 160 young people in the summer of 2024.

Gateshead Council HAF leads conceptualise the HAF Plus programme as comprising of four key elements: independent travel, meal/food vouchers, health and wellbeing activities, and safeguarding. However, the findings from the overall evaluation show that the offer also includes a range of food-related, arts-based, cultural and physical activities, which were accessed and enjoyed by young people. Indeed, building upon a growing network of community organisations, arts, cultural, sports and leisure venues, transport, businesses, and anchor institutions, the HAF leads at the council were able to roll out a full programme of wide-ranging activities for young people, and involve ‘Young Inspectors’ in evaluating the programme delivery. Many partner organisations shared common values, objectives and aims relating to supporting young people, and some offered discounted or free activities, enabling the council to manage finances effectively and increase both breadth and depth of provision.

Although HAF has been running for several years, it must be recognised that this is the first year of a full HAF Plus programme in Gateshead. Given it is the first year of the full HAF Plus programme, the overall success of the programme through the eyes of young people, parents/carers, MI data, and delivery organisations has been excellent. It is particularly refreshing that the HAF leads in Gateshead Council have an in-depth understanding of the programme, processes, criteria and outcomes, yet at the same time they are able to critically review and reflect upon their own practice. For clarity, the general discussion will focus on key outcomes of the research and triangulate the findings from across both studies and different participant groups. Recommendations will be made under each sub-section, rather than at the end of the report.

Recruitment to HAF Plus

Young people were recruited to the HAF Plus programme through multiple channels including a number of pre-established youth networks (i.e. Gateshead’s Youth Council and Young Inspectors) and secondary schools. Where schools engaged, school staff supported council staff in identifying young people in receipt of FSM and inviting HAF Plus leads into schools advertise the offer through assemblies. Schools tended to frame invitations to HAF Plus as being a reward, to try to eliminate any potential stigma associated with the programme (Defeyter et al., 2022). However, not all schools were forthcoming with support for the HAF Plus programme, with some young people explaining that their school did not advertise the programme at all.

The content of such advertising needs to be carefully considered, as some young people recognised that HAF Plus could be deemed ‘too good to be true’. To attenuate this issue, young people suggested a HAF Plus Ambassador programme, as currently used by Northumbria University ([HAF Plus Ambassadors Scheme](#)). We support this idea, but wonder if the North East Combined Authority, with its convening powers, could further support knowledge exchange and dissemination to improve equity in access to HAF Plus across the region. Having a regional network, perhaps through building upon the framework used by Northumbria University, would further support HAF Plus coherence, collective buying power, recruitment of organisations, and link to wider regional objectives (e.g. transport and social mobility). At a national level, the DfE may wish to reconsider the eligibility criteria for HAF Plus (and HAF) through adopting a targeted universalism approach as used with great effect by Kitchen Social at the Mayor’s Fund for London. These combined approaches and processes would save time, money, and ensure more equitable recruitment and access to HAF Plus (and HAF).

The HAF Plus app

The HAF Plus app was a key facilitator for the successful expansion of the HAF Plus programme in Gateshead in 2024. One key partner organisation delivered HAF Plus across two local authorities in the North East, and suggested that due to its success in 2024, using the app as one centralised online registration system across other local authorities would be beneficial. HAF Plus leads similarly noted that other local authorities are interested in developing or purchasing a similar booking system. For all participant groups, the digital registration system within the HAF Plus app was recognised as being advantageous in comparison to paper-based and in-person methods. Indeed, young people appreciated the convenience of registering and cancelling their attendance at activities remotely.

Importantly, the HAF Plus leads in Gateshead Council considered digital exclusion and the prevalent digital divide in the UK, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Watts et al., 2020). Digital exclusion was attenuated by allowing young people to borrow digital devices for the duration of the HAF Plus programme or to participate in HAF Plus through a fully paper-based method. There may be further opportunities for local authorities and NECA to consider how anchor institutions can support the digital divide for this age group through recycling IT equipment, including tablets and smartphones.

Whilst the app is undoubtedly the preferred tool for engagement in the booking process and communications, the HAF Plus deliverers noted that future iterations of the app could include further information about attendees; particularly ensuring that emergency contact details and medical information is always available. Further app development could also include evaluation tools to enable the council to merge MI data with evaluation outcomes, for use during the programme and collated at the end of the programme. For example, the app could capture data on how much young

people enjoyed sessions and enable 'real time' feedback to deliverers so any issues or concerns during programme delivery can be addressed. Young people could then receive an automatic notification via the app regarding any changes.

Registration, attendance and timetabling

Whilst the HAF Plus app supported registration, notifications and attendance, some deliverers reported that despite their attempts to engage young people, attendance at some sessions were low. HAF leads identified that delivering sessions that were typically developed for schools were often not well attended and deliverers acknowledged that their marketing and advertisement was too limited in 2024, which may have resulted in low attendance at their sessions. In future years, both the HAF Plus app and further opportunities to attend in-person marketing sessions with young people, earlier in advance of the school summer holidays, may help to overcome such challenges. Deliverers also recognised an opportunity to network across organisations and learn about others' activities in advance of the school holiday periods, so that they could promote nearby activities to young people, with an aim to increase attendance across the whole programme. One of the key findings was that the activities had to be fun!

Offering spaces for the general public to attend sessions was suggested as another possible way to drive attendance and mitigate costs. In the pre-pilot co-design sprints led by young people, this was one of the original suggestions but worded the other way around, in that 'HAFers' could join public sessions. This may work well for larger organisations (e.g. the Centre for Life, Theatre Royal) as well as for smaller community organisations, providing that they have capacity; although a good quality assurance process would be required to ensure compliance to health and safety, child safeguarding, and School Food Standards. Moreover, HAF Plus leads recognised the importance of removing unpopular activities from the offer, and overbooking to a higher percentage, to overcome such issues in future years of provision.

Timetabling clashes were highlighted as an explanation for young people failing to register for certain sessions, rather than a lack of interest. Likewise, the amount of time required to travel to sessions meant that young people could sometimes not attend sessions which were delivered consecutively, but at different locations. As such, young people recommended that whole days of activities are incorporated into the HAF Plus programme in future years, like the day of sport and wellbeing activities delivered at Northumbria University in 2024, which was extremely positively received. Indeed, young people were enthusiastic about this programme, particularly as all activities were located close to one another (i.e. on the same campus) and recommended a skills-based version is delivered in the future (i.e. first aid, cooking, careers advice). Alternatively, or in combination, Gateshead Council could plan future HAF Plus activities and timetable, with young people and

delivery partners, to consider some of the issues raised in this report, incorporating whole day events, individual activities, and even a summer camp.

Range of activities

Overall, the range of activities offered across the programme was very good, with 77% of young people reporting that HAF Plus allowed them to try new activities that they had not tried before, and 71% of young people rating the range of HAF Plus activities as somewhat good to very good.

Likewise, the qualitative findings demonstrate that young people were afforded the opportunity to take part in novel experiences and develop new skills, which reduced boredom and made the summer holidays an exciting time that could be discussed with friends upon their return to school.

Approximately 50% of young people reported that they participated in an arts-based/cultural activity for the first time through the HAF Plus programme, and nearly 58% rated the arts and cultural activities provided as somewhat good to very good, with only 1.9% of young people rating the offer as poor. Whilst 36% of young people reported that they enjoyed participating in the arts and cultural activities, 30% of young people did not to take part in these activities, and they were also ranked low in terms of order in the BWS scores in study 2. Nearly 58% of parents/carers reported that HAF Plus had allowed their child to participate in new cultural and arts activities and experiences, with nearly 70% of parents/carers rating these activities as somewhat good to very good. So, whilst the overall offer is good, careful analysis of the MI data needs to be conducted to see which activities were popular. As previously stated however, this could be due to the terminology used in the survey. We suggest that the council collapses the MI data across cultural activities to gain a more detailed understanding of attendance.

Physical activities

In terms of physical activity, over 65% of young people thought that HAF Plus had supported them to engage in more physical activities than previously, and the majority of young people (65%) thought that the physical activities were somewhat good to very good, with a similarly high level of enjoyment of these physical activities. In addition, nearly 72% of parent/carers agreed that HAF Plus increased their child's participation in physical activities, with 42% strongly agreeing. Over 80% of parents/carers rated the provision of physical activities in the programme as somewhat good to very good, with approximately 47% of parents/carers rating the physical activities as very good. The qualitative findings similarly show that young people appreciated the physical activity offer, which was implemented and delivered through specific physical activity sessions, such as MMA at Northumbria University and football at Newcastle United Foundation. However, young people also welcomed the opportunity to adjust their lifestyle and participate in more walking than they otherwise would have. Indeed, HAF Plus leads recognised that the independent travel model often required young people to walk between public transport stations and activity locations. Not only is this

important in ensuring HAF Plus adheres to the HAF guidance stipulated by the DfE regarding physical activity (GOV.UK, 2024), but research findings demonstrate that increased physical activity is associated with improved physical health and mental wellbeing, and is effective in combating childhood obesity (Daly-Smith et al., 2021).

Health and wellbeing activities

Approximately 35% of parents/carers agreed that their child either received or had access to health and wellbeing information, and a similar percentage (38%) agreed that their child had greater awareness of health-related issues (e.g. vaping, alcohol). These percentages are similar to the self-reported data from young people in the young person's survey, where we explored whether young people received or had access to health and wellbeing information through digital sources and/or speaking to health professionals. Only approximately 25% of young people reported that they had good access to such information. This is therefore an area of HAF Plus that requires further co-design. Given that Gateshead Council is now using an app for HAF Plus registrations and notifications, we recommend that the council considers ways in which to partner with local NHS services, such as the NHS Healthier Together programme, which provides health and wellbeing information through a website and app. The NHS keeps this information up to date and refers users to relevant information regarding local services. As Healthier Together is a national NHS service, this may be of interest to HAF providers, other local authorities, and the DfE; particularly as all the information provided is quality assured.

Socialisation and safety

Prior HAF research has shown that socialisation and feelings of safety are important factors in terms of supporting attendance and wellbeing (Stretesky et al., 2020). We also know that feeling safe changes the way people think about their immediate perceptions of risk (Pepper et al., 2023). We therefore asked young people how safe they felt whilst attending and travelling to their chosen HAF activities. Over 77% of young people felt somewhat safe to very safe whilst participating in HAF Plus, with 50% of young people reporting that they felt very safe. The qualitative data similarly show that safeguarding and safety were key considerations made by HAF leads and deliverers when planning, implementing and delivering the HAF Plus programme. Furthermore, the HAF Plus app was developed to include personal safety tips and provide a convenient method of contacting HAF Plus leads. Young people were made aware of the central Community Hub at the Metro Centre for in-person support, if required. These considerations should continue to be made in future to ensure the safety of young people throughout the programme.

We also asked young people whether HAF Plus had provided young people with opportunities to meet up with friends and to make new friends. Nearly 75% of young people reported that HAF Plus provided them with opportunities to meet up with friends and to make new friends, and this was the

highest ranked HAF attribute in the young person's survey, showing that socialisation is a priority for young people. Previous research has shown that socialisation is important in supporting programme HAF attendance and enhancing young people's wellbeing (Stretesky et al., 2020), and the qualitative findings similarly highlight that the programme afforded young people with socialisation opportunities over the summer, which they may otherwise not have encountered (Long, Stretesky & Defeyter, 2022).

Food provision and food education

In terms of food provision, young people received vouchers for a range of outlets each week. Overall, young people were satisfied with the variety of food that was on offer but experienced some barriers regarding the accessibility and availability of the food. The most notable barrier was that the businesses where vouchers could be used were not always near the activities that young people attended. Only particular franchised outlets accepted the vouchers, and some young people struggled to differentiate whether a voucher had already been redeemed; young people therefore recommended that the HAF Plus app incorporates a system which indicates which vouchers are already used. Moreover, it was recommended by young people, and acknowledged by HAF Plus leads, that an increased number of outlets, spread geographically wider across the region, should be added into the programme in future. Data from the young person's survey showed that overall, the food was well received, with 55% of young people rating the food as somewhat good to very good. Over 61% of young people thought that the food provided within the HAF Plus programme was nutritious, and nearly 60% of young people reported that the food offered accommodated a range of different dietary/taste preferences. Over 75% of parents/carers reported that it was somewhat easy to very easy for their child to access the food on offer in HAF Plus, and the majority of parents/carers rated the food as nutritious.

Additionally, 50% of young people and 47% of parents/carers agreed that HAF Plus enabled young people to learn food-related skills and knowledge to prepare nutritious meals. The majority of young people (58%) also enjoyed the food-related activities included in the HAF Plus offer. Prior research has shown that the most effective method for young people to learn food-related skills is through experiential learning (i.e. preparing and cooking food) (Round et al., 2024), which was the focus of several HAF Plus activities in the 2024 offer (i.e. baking stotties with the baker from Big River Bakery; cooking lunch with the executive chef from Chartwells at Northumbria University). A hands-on approach to learning has been shown to spark an initial interest with food, often leading to further interest and continued skill development (Kolb, 1984; Dean et al., 2022), and it is understood that food-related skills that are developed in childhood often transfer into adulthood (Round et al., 2022). This is an important consideration for the HAF Plus programme, which aims to provide opportunities for young people to develop new skills, enhance their independence and prepare for their futures. As such, whilst these findings are encouraging, further work should continue to be done in this area.

Transport and travel

Gateshead Council purchased travel passes for all young people who attended HAF Plus in summer 2024. This enabled young people to independently access all public transport services in the region, for free, during the summer holidays. HAF Plus leads acknowledged that whilst this provision is neither mandatory nor typical for HAF-based programme to provide, the cost of travel can prevent young people from attending activities and experiences in the school holidays (Stretesky et al., 2020); an issue thereby eliminated through such provision the Gateshead HAF Plus model. The qualitative data found that the introduction of the free travel pass was overwhelmingly popular, as young people could use the card at any time during the school holiday period to maintain contact with friends and family, and to utilise the assets available to them in the North East. Gateshead is a diverse borough, with a town centre, the Metro Centre, and a vast peri-rural and rural footprint. To evaluate the effectiveness of the travel element of HAF Plus, we asked young people about how easy it was to travel to HAF Plus activities. The majority of young people (57%) found travelling to the activities to be somewhat to very easy. Analyses of the open-ended question showed that for those young people who experienced a travel-related barrier, the difficulty was mainly related to finding the location of the activity, suggesting that further detail on venues is required in the HAF Plus app. However, it is important to note that, within the survey (study 2), young people rated travel as the lowest value attribute of HAF Plus. The majority of parent/carers (75%) reported that it was easy for their child to use the free transport to travel to HAF Plus activities, with over 50% reporting that this was very easy.

Needless to say, providing such support to young people, up to the age of 18 years of age, would seem a worthwhile investment and tool to support young people in accessing social, cultural and employment opportunities. Without free travel, the young people would have likely been unable to access the activities on offer to them across Gateshead and Newcastle. Aligning to NECA transport plans may help in addressing some of the rather odd scenarios we currently experience in the North East, whereby a young person can travel for free if accompanied by a parent but is required to pay full fare if travelling independently.

HAF Plus overall

Finally, we sought parents'/carers' and young people's overall views about the HAF Plus programme. Over 57% parent/carers reported that HAF Plus improved their child's self-esteem and over 53% parents/carers thought that HAF Plus supported their child's return to school for the autumn term. Moreover, over 73% of young people were somewhat satisfied to extremely satisfied with HAF Plus. These are excellent findings for the first year in which HAF Plus has been rolled out across Gateshead.

5. Conclusion

Across study 1 and study 2, all participant groups recognised HAF Plus as being associated with a range of positive benefits for young people and their families. The programme reduced feelings of boredom in the school holidays and provided young people with new, exciting experiences, physical and cultural activities, and opportunities to socialise with friends and family, which they may otherwise not have encountered (Long, Stretesky & Defeyter, 2022). The HAF Plus leads were mindful to ensure that some activities in the offer were also accessible to the general public (i.e. cinema), so that young people could return to school and discuss their experiences with others, without being identified as attending HAF Plus; to eliminate any potential stigma associated with the programme (Defeyter et al., 2022).

The HAF Plus programme was noted, by all groups in this evaluation, to benefit families financially with HAF leads estimating **an approximate saving for families of £400 per child**, if they took part in multiple activities, and utilised their travel pass across the region, during summer 2024. Based on the findings of this report we conclude that, whilst there are a few minor adjustments and considerations required, the delivery of HAF Plus by Gateshead Council has been very successful. We suggest that the council explores our recommendations with a view of implementing some of these in 2025.

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