



Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme

Report by Premier Education on the urgent need to continue support for low-income families during school holidays

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Introduction

School holidays, particularly the long summer break, are traditionally considered to be fun, carefree opportunities for children to have a rest from the routine of school and enjoy making memories with their families and friends.

For many children, this is indeed the case. However, the stark reality for many low-income families is that school holidays place additional pressure on already-squeezed household budgets. Not only are these households limited in terms of finding and financing appropriate childcare, but they may also find it hard to access enriching activities that provide children with all-important social, wellbeing and educational opportunities.

Food is also a key area of concern. With no access to the free school meals that these children are entitled to, school holidays place many children at risk of 'holiday hunger'. It's no surprise then that foodbanks usually see an increase in demand¹ for emergency food for children during the summer holidays.

Addressing the challenges that school holidays place on low-income, food-insecure families isn't a 'quick fix', but one scheme that has been created to help address these issues is the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.

This scheme, set up by the Department for Education in 2018, has provided vital support for low-income families over school holidays through free holiday camp places. These places, specifically for children who qualify for benefits-related free school meals, not only mean children have access to enriching activities and experiences but also receive nutritious meals.

However, with this scheme coming to an end after the 2024/25 financial year, we, at Premier Education, feel it's imperative that the risks low-income families and children will face are highlighted, and urge the government to consider an alternative way of providing support.

Without childcare support during school holidays, children from food-insecure families are affected in a number of detrimental ways, from isolation and poor mental wellbeing to inactivity, poor nutrition and even slow educational attainment.

In this report, produced by Premier Education, which has been a key delivery partner and largest multi-site provider in the HAF scheme, we look at the overall impact the programme has had and our concerns regarding the ending of the scheme.

The cost of summer holidays and its effect on attainment, both educationally and in terms of wellbeing, points to a policy blind spot with respect to providing equal opportunities for children.²



Objectives of the HAF programmes



The HAF programme is much more than just offering free holiday camp places to those families who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. The provision has been designed to ensure that the children who attend receive the best possible experience, have fun and enjoy a range of activities.

Key aims include:

- The provision of nutritious meals
- The chance to engage in plenty of physical activity
- The chance to have fun and make friends
- A greater appreciation and understanding of how important healthy food is
- The provision of varied, engaging activities that support development
- Ensuring all children feel safe and secure
- Providing access to support services as required
- Ensuring children go back to school refreshed and ready to learn
- Allowing families opportunities to get involved with cookery classes
- Signposting families to other relevant help and support services.

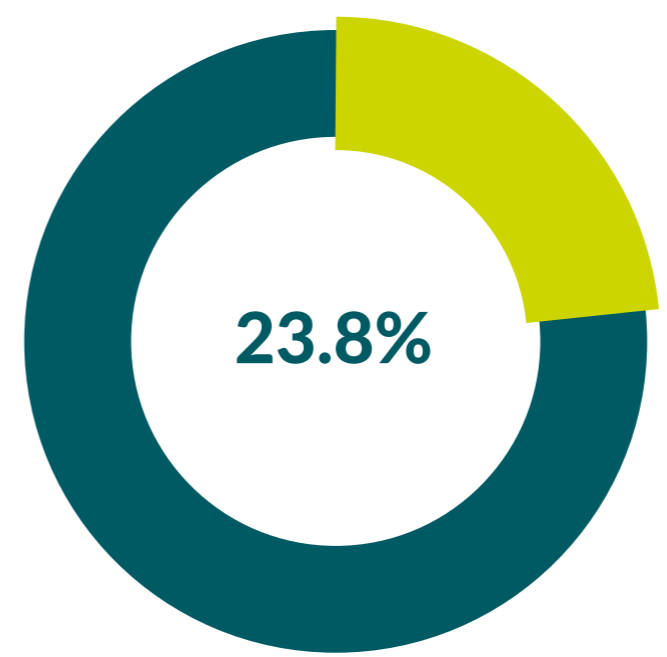


What impact has the programme had so far?

Since the launch of the scheme, hundreds of thousands of children have benefited from positive, fun and varied experiences during school holidays. The programme has been instrumental in taking the pressure off families who may not otherwise be able to afford enriching activities or nutritious food.

In addition to this, provision of camp places through the HAF programme helps to address the learning loss often associated with the longer school holidays. Research³ has shown that the attainment gap between the richest and poorest pupils is mostly driven by inequalities experienced through the school holidays. Learning opportunities created by the varied activities and experiences at camps helps to close this gap

It's important to state that local authorities receive funding to run the HAF programme for six weeks of school holidays, covering the Christmas, Easter and some of the summer holidays.



Over 2 million pupils⁴ (23.8%) were eligible for free school meals in the 2022/23 academic year, compared to 1.89 million in the previous year.



Who delivers the HAF programme?

Local authorities receive funding based on the number of children eligible for free school meals in the area. Organisations interested in delivering the programme, or a part of the programme, then bid to become a delivery partner.

To ensure high standards of delivery, there is a framework of standards that all partners must meet. This is to ensure that the aims of the programme are met and that all children have the same opportunities – whether they are being funded as part of the HAF programme or not.

Our role in the HAF programme

As the UK's leading provider of sport and physical activity to primary schools, becoming a delivery partner for the HAF programme was a natural fit for us. We're extremely proud of the impact we've had as part of the scheme, as we strongly believe that all children should have access to a variety of activities and healthy food during school holidays.

Some highlights for the 2022-23 year:

We worked with 60+ HAF partners

60+

We delivered in 292 Premier Education venues across 79 Premier Education territories

292

99,000 places were offered

99,000

We delivered 4,953 unique days

4,953

625 activity professionals delivered the activities

625

7,327 children enjoyed fulfilling days with us

7,327

See our Social Return On Investment (SROI) analysis in the Appendix.

What's next for the programme?

We understand that the funding for the programme ends in March 2025.⁵

We are extremely concerned that without this scheme, children's lives will be severely impacted. So often, schools are lifelines for children. They are places of safety, security, routine and stimulation. Not to mention the all-important food provision. School holidays can put vulnerable children at risk due to them not being monitored by teachers – who can spot a hungry child from a mile off.

Ultimately, we strongly recommend that the scheme is extended, or a replacement scheme is introduced, as quickly as possible. Without access to the HAF programme, the challenges families will face during school holidays will be crippling.

It's vital that the new government circulates communication about the future of the scheme as soon as possible, to prepare all parties involved.

“My 6 and 9 year old daughters both attended the Premier Education sports camps in the Easter holidays and loved it. They made new friends and loved all the different activities offered – there was crafting as well as sports.

“A huge benefit for me is they were provided with a free lunch and without fail came home happy.

“As a single parent of 3 I have always struggled to balance my childcare requirements and work during the school holidays and the support provided via the HAF programme and Premier Education has transformed what used to be a stressful time for our family into something that myself and the children look forward to.

“The staff are always super upbeat and really professional. I would recommend these camps to anyone to keep their little ones entertained during the holidays.”



Concern area

#01 Food

The current rate of inflation and subsequent cost of living is already meaning food-insecure families are going hungry. Because of this, the demand for food banks is at an all time high, with 655,000 people using Trussell Trust Food Banks⁶ for the first time last year – a 40% increase from five years ago.

According to UNICEF,⁷ around 19% of children under the age of 15 in the UK live with an adult who is moderately or severely food-insecure.

What are the effects of food security on children and why should we be worried? Aside from the fact that it's inconceivable that children should miss meals simply because they are not at school to have a meal, the impact it has on their development is staggering.

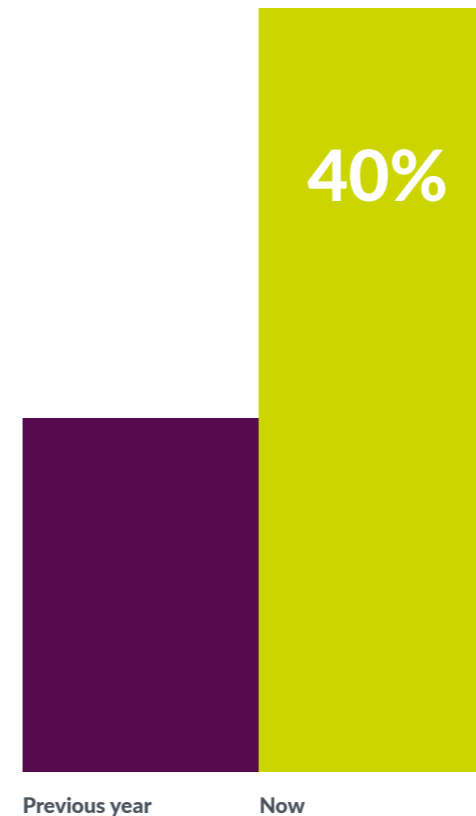
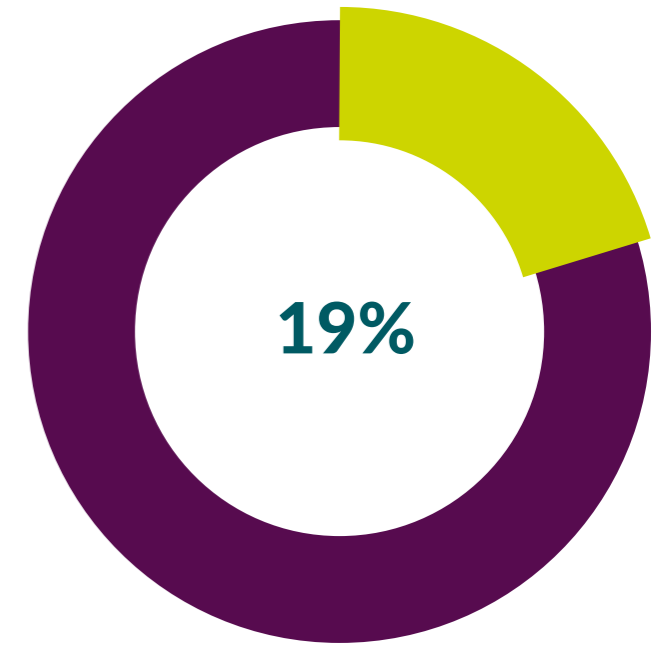
Studies on these effects within developed countries are few and far between, but evidence from the United States⁸ suggests that children experiencing even marginal food insecurity – at least one episode in the previous 12 months – have lower cognitive test scores and exhibit slower learning than children who do not experience any food-insecurity.

Programmes such as the HAF scheme, which place a strong emphasis on providing nutritious meals as part of the day, are imperative to families who rely on free school meals during term time.



Wraparound Care

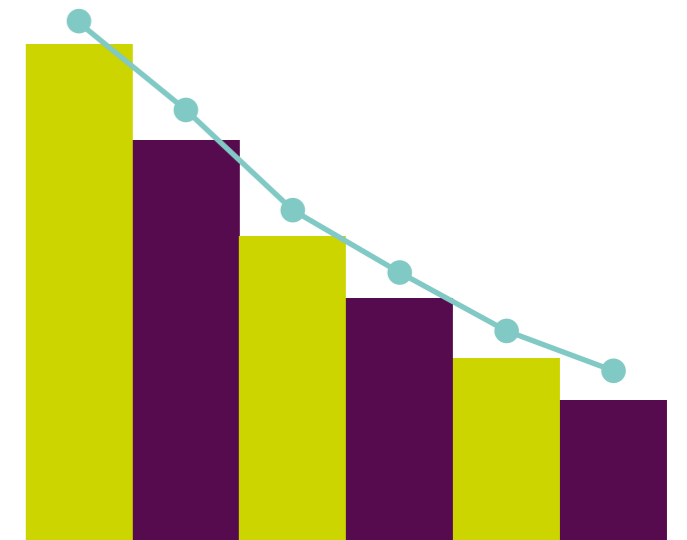
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Concern area

#02 Childcare

Providing children with happy experiences is a large part of the HAF programme, but another vital element is childcare. School holidays can be problematic for many families who need to work, but struggle to access childcare.

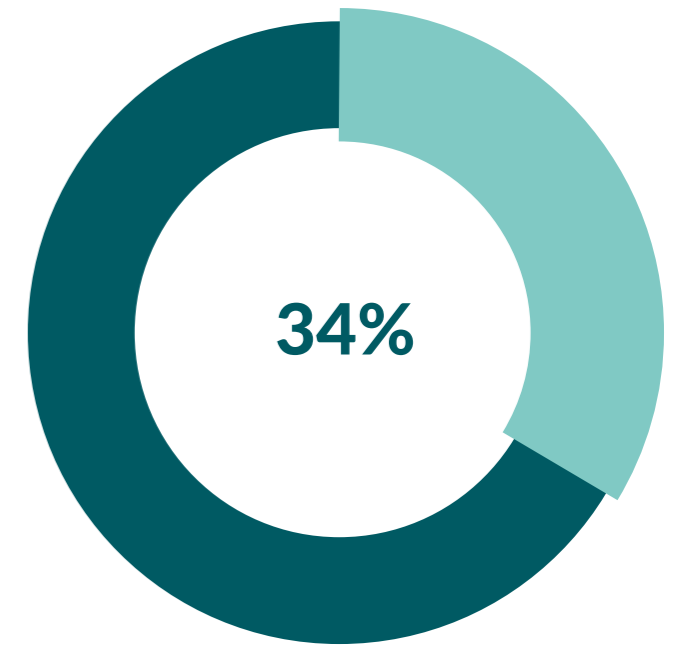
As part of the recent childcare reforms, which wants all primary-aged children to have access to wraparound childcare from September 2026, it's clear that supporting working parents is a priority.

However, all families need access to affordable, reliable childcare, all year round. Not only would this allow parents to work, providing employers with a reliable workforce, but it would also mean children from all backgrounds get to have opportunities for socialisation, fun and stimulation outside of school.

With research⁹ showing that four in ten low-income families have gone into debt due to childcare costs, nearly half have had to reduce their hours and a fifth quit their job altogether to manage childcare, this issue has become even more urgent than ever.



34% of local authorities¹⁰ in England 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that the HAF programme helps to provide sufficient childcare for working parents.



What are the current barriers to accessing holiday childcare?

Cost:

Holiday childcare is more expensive than, for example, term-time after school clubs. The Coram Holiday Childcare Survey 2023¹¹ found that holiday childcare costs have risen 3% since 2022. Families now have to find £157, on average, to fund one week at a holiday camp.



Availability:

The same survey also reports that only 24% of English local authorities have enough holiday childcare for parents in their area who work full time. Although holiday childcare is cheaper in the public sector, limited availability means many families will struggle to get a place.

Limited support available:

Working parents can use tax-free childcare to help fund holiday childcare, but only if the provider is Ofsted-registered. But with many activity-based providers which only run for short periods not being required to register, this means many families miss out on financial support.

3%



Concern area

#03 physical and mental wellbeing

Being able to access holiday clubs during school holidays doesn't just alleviate the issue of childcare out of term-time, but is known to positively impact children's health and wellbeing.

Children from low-income families often don't have the same opportunities to take part in enriching, fun, sociable activities outside of school, potentially leaving them isolated, unhappy and unhealthy.

Holiday camps are designed to involve children in a wide range of sports, activities, games and crafts that they may not have access to at home or even at school. With the focus being on participation and having fun, there's no pressure for children to 'be the best', just have a go.

Why are holiday camps good for children?

Physical activity:

Children should be getting at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day, according to government guidelines. Not only is it fun, but it helps strengthen muscles and bones, develops motor skills and helps prevent disease later on in life. Camps offer plenty of opportunities to try new sports and get involved in active games.

Mental wellbeing:

It's a well-known fact that plenty of physical activity boosts the release of endorphins and improves mood, helps children feel good about themselves and benefits sleep.

Routine:

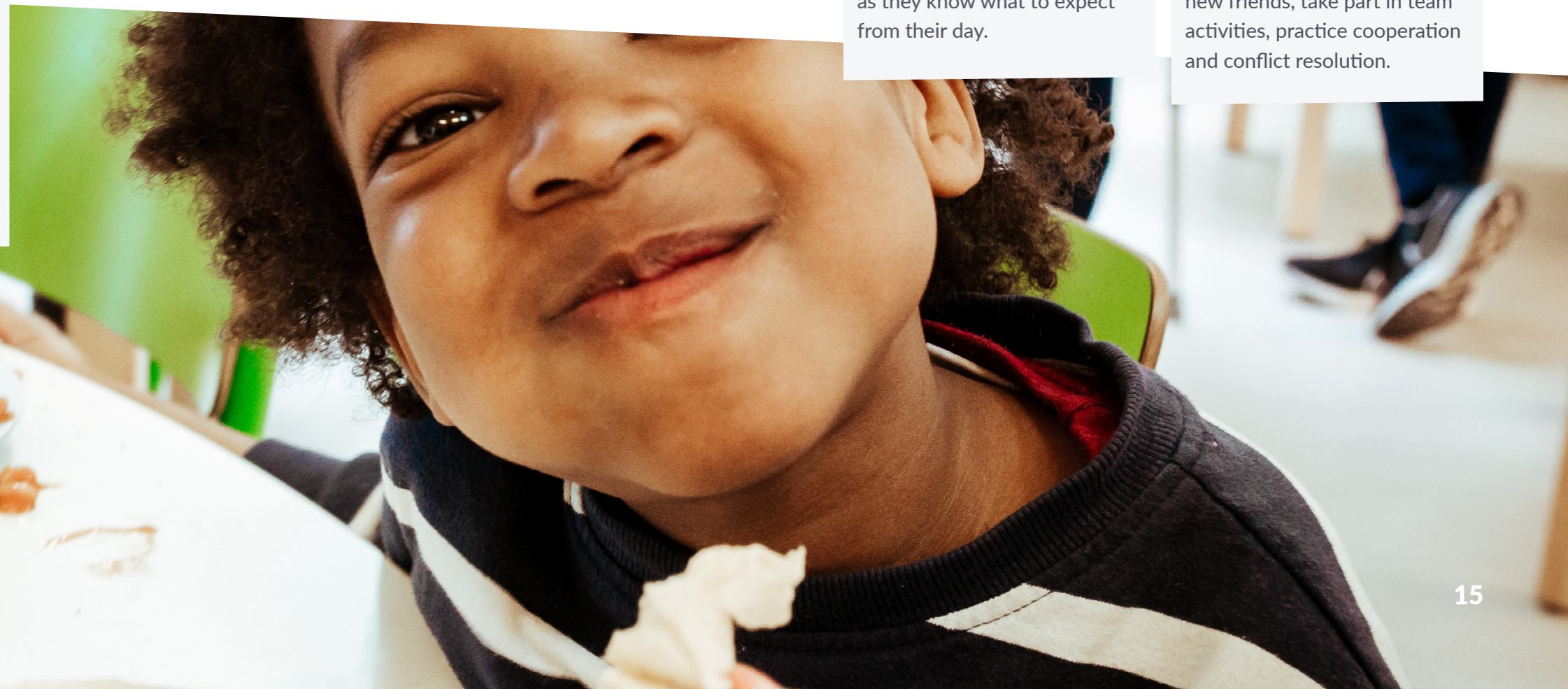
While it's nice to have a break from the routine of school once in a while, children thrive off routine, helping them to feel comfortable and confident as they know what to expect from their day.

Ensures variety:

Holiday camps aren't just about getting physical, but offer a wide range of activities to keep children stimulated, inspire curiosity and creativity and develop problem solving skills.

Social skills:

Being able to get together with peers outside of school is so important for children's development. At camps, they have the opportunity to make new friends, take part in team activities, practice cooperation and conflict resolution.



Concern area

#04 loss of earning for those involved in HAF delivery

Delivery of the programme requires the services, products and expertise of a range of businesses, from the delivery partner and venue to the food provider as well as the engagement of specialists where required.

Ending the programme would significantly impact these businesses within the school holiday periods, who have come to rely on this scheme. Not only would these businesses suffer financially, it could even result in unemployment, particularly for the smaller, local providers.

Conclusion

Quite simply, the timing of this programme coming to an end couldn't be worse. The cost of living, including sky-high food and energy costs and eye-watering interest rates, mean families – even those with reasonable salaries – are having to make difficult choices.

But it's food-insecure families who are finding life the hardest at the moment, and of course, it's children who will suffer the most. We want to see the all-important HAF programme continued so that low-income families don't have the stress of making sure their children are kept safe, happy and healthy over the school holidays.

Viewing childcare as a year-round consideration and recognising that it's a necessary requirement for primary school children, not just pre-school children, is urgently needed. We strongly recommend that families are provided with a childcare funding allowance – based on annual household income – to provide working parents with the confidence and security they need to work, while ensuring children never experience 'holiday hunger' again.



Appendix

As part of our evaluation of the programme, we have collected and analysed data on the social outcomes and impacts that the programme has generated for the participants and their families.

The results of our social return on investment (SROI) analysis, which measures the value of the social, environmental and economic benefits of the programme in relation to the costs of delivering it have been created utilising formulas for workings of SROI from previous studies.

HAF 2023:
 Network Funding – £3,381,621;
 Children/bookings – 53,766; Fund per place – £62.89

SROI Calculations

Obesity £1:£1.91 (Davies, et al. 2019)
 £120 per place
 £6,458,366 total impact

Anti-social behaviour and associated crime £1:£3.70 (Ward & Thurston 2009)
 £232.69 per place
 £12,510,971 total impact

Wellbeing, self-confidence and learning opportunities £1:£5.50 (Murphy, 2015)
 £345.89 per place
 £18,597,390 total impact

Total:
£37,566,727 total SROI impact

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