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Holiday Activities and Food (HAF): Providing Bags of Hope



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Introduction

Holiday clubs, managed by local organisations, are a response to holiday hunger in the UK (Mann et al., 2018). In 2017, the All-Party-Parliamentary Group on School Food asked the Healthy Living Lab to map holiday provision across the UK to gain an understanding of what was being done about holiday hunger at the local level. The researchers found hundreds of holiday clubs had been established across England and many existed to provide support to children living in disadvantaged areas (Mann et al., 2018). Until recently, holiday clubs were largely viewed as spaces for feeding children during the summer (Mann et al., 2018). Emerging research shows, however, that these clubs offer communities a means to organise and provide a variety of material goods, services and information to children, caregivers, parents, volunteers, and staff (Stretesky, Defeyter, Long, Sattar, et al., 2020).

Research shows that holiday clubs provide children with a safe place to be physically active during the summer (Mann, 2019; Shinwell, 2019; Shinwell et al., 2021). Holiday clubs may prepare pupils for return to school, aid parents with childcare so that they can continue to work in paid employment during the school holidays, increase the wellbeing of children and parents and provide communities with the opportunity of improving dietary intake (Crilley, 2021; Defeyter et al., 2015a, 2019; Holley & Mason, 2019; Long, Stretesky, et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2020; Morgan, McConnon, et al., 2019a; Shinwell, 2019; Shinwell et al., 2021; Stretesky, Defeyter, Long, Ritchie, et al., 2020; Stretesky, Defeyter, Long, Sattar, et al., 2020). Holiday clubs have even been found to signpost parents to resources and other community services, such as healthcare, financial services, and housing advice (Long et al., 2022; Mann, 2019; Shinwell, 2019; Stretesky, Defeyter, Long, Sattar, et al., 2020). In short, it is clear that holiday clubs do more than simply feed children.

The Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF)

The Department for Education (DfE) recognised the need for holiday provision to provide children with access to activities and nutritious food and funded several pilot Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) projects, commencing in 2018. This involved local authorities recruiting community organisations to deliver free, healthy food and activities for children during the school summer holidays. Following an evaluation of a number of HAF pilot projects, the DfE announced an expansion of the HAF programme across all 151 higher-tier Local Authorities in England in 2021, at a cost of approximately £200M p.a. (Department for Education, 2021a). The four main aims of HAF are 1) to improve the nutrition of children who are eligible for benefits-related FSM, in the holidays, 2) To increase healthy behaviours (e.g., participation in physical and enriching activities), 3) To improve school readiness, and 4). To improve parent's confidence and behaviour around purchasing and preparing healthy meals on a sustainable basis (Department for Education, 2021a). The HAF

programme is free for children who receive benefits-related free school meals. Whereas any children not eligible for and in receipt of means-tested free school meals can also attend but they should pay to do so, or their places paid for by alternative funding. Local authorities can either coordinate their local HAF programme themselves or work with another organisation to coordinate the provision on their behalf (Department for Education, 2021a). Notably, HAF 2021 was larger in terms of funding and scope to prior HAF programmes and included some new programme outcomes; including engaging families in nutritional education, budgeting, providing better referral systems to other services, and offering increased flexibility in the funding terms for Local Authorities to provide HAF for a week during the Easter and Christmas holidays.

Numerous evaluations have shown that children growing up in low-income households are likely to have a poor diet and are more likely to be overweight or obese with associated poorer health outcomes both physically, mentally, and socially compared to their more affluent peers. Research has also investigated the effect of living in food insecure households on the educational attainment and social and emotional well-being of children. For example, (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018) analysed data on the results of 3,700 children's reading and maths skills using tests specially designed for the Early Childhood Longitudinal-Birth (ECLS-B) study and teachers' analysis of children's social and emotional well-being. Data on parental levels of household food insecurity were collected at three time points (when children were aged nine months, when they were two years of age and when they started kindergarten) using the USA Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). The authors found that children who experienced food insecurity performed less well both academically, socially, and emotionally than children who were food secure. Furthermore, children who experienced repeated episodes of household food insecurity, and the greater the frequency of exposure to household food insecurity, the less well children performed in tests.

Using data on children in receipt of FSM as a proxy for disadvantage, data from National Pupil Database (NPD) which contains data on children's performance in tests and teacher assessments when they start school, at Key Stages 1 and 2 and GCSE exam results, researchers found that by the time children reach the age of 16 years, children who were in receipt of free school meals were 24.3 months behind children who did not (Andrews et al., 2017). More recent analysis of the data in the NPD and FSM recipient status suggests that at the current rate of progress, it will take more than 500 years to narrow the gap in attainment between children from different socio-economic backgrounds (Hutchinson et al., 2019).

The benefits of HAF/Holiday Clubs

Over the last few years, the evidence regarding the effectiveness of HAF has been steadily growing. The Department for Education expects local authorities to deliver the equivalent of 6 weeks' total holiday provision across the Easter, Summer and Christmas school holiday periods. Indeed, over the Easter and Christmas periods, eligible children should be offered at least 4 days' provision for at least 4 hours per day, whilst during the six-week school summer holidays, clubs are expected to offer at least 4 weeks provision, covering a minimum of 16 days with 4 hours of delivery per day; delivering food that complies to School Food Standards and a range of enriching activities. HAF is of significant reach, with the most recent figures indicating that approximately 750,000 children attend a HAF per annum. A number of studies have shown that the provision of food at holiday clubs has the potential to make a difference to family food and finances by alleviating financial strains on household budgets (Defeyter et al., 2015a; Graham et al., 2016; Morgan, Melendez-Torres, et al., 2019; Shinwell & Defeyter, 2021; Stretesky, Defeyter, Long, Ritchie, et al., 2020). Other studies have shown, holiday provision has the potential to reduce the risk of families experiencing household food insecurity, which has been discussed earlier in this literature review (Holley et al., 2019; Long et al., 2018), and improving children's dietary intake (Crilley et al., 2022; Mann, 2019; Shinwell, 2019). In addition, holiday provision offers numerous additional resources that improve the wellbeing for parents, children, volunteers, and staff (Defeyter et al., 2018b; Stretesky, Defeyter, Long, Sattar, et al., 2020); and the DfE's evaluation and those undertaken by local authorities have shown similar findings.

In addition to the published academic literature on holiday provision, there are several third sector reports that focus on various outcomes for families and the communities in which these clubs operate. Many of these case studies feature in *Holiday Hunger in the UK: Local Responses to Childhood Food Insecurity* (Long, Defeyter & Stretesky, 2022). Details of example holiday programmes, abstracts of research and policy papers can be found in *Holiday Programmes: Activity and Food* at <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/takeontomorrow/it-is-time/holiday-activity-and-food-programmes>. Further details on how holiday clubs have adjusted their mode of delivery as a result of Covid social distancing rules are emerging in the literature (Bayes et al., 2021; Long, Defeyter & Stretesky, 2022), as are a number of case studies detailing approaches to holiday provision during Covid by the Governments of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Long, Defeyter & Stretesky, 2022). Until recently, little was known about the modes of delivering nutritional education within HAF (Round et al., 2021; Round et al., 2024); and whilst many HAF clubs adhere to School Food Standards, further work is required to satisfy age-appropriate nutritional standards (Vitale, Crossland, Shinwell, Stretesky, Defeyter & Brownlee, 2023).

School Readiness

An interesting finding that often appears in the research literature, including our own research, is that parents and HAF leads often perceive that HAF improves 'school readiness'. In terms of HAF, we define this as 'preparedness of pupils to return to school after a school holiday'. However, whilst children and young people may be 'prepared to return to school' as a result of having enjoyed enriching activities through HAF, it is rather a fuzzy concept in the sense of preparing to go back to school on an annual basis, and research is currently being undertaken to explore factors that promote school readiness within this context. At the same time, research has also shown that parents are engaged in a continuous cycle of coping strategies (Shinwell & Defeyter, 2021) and the pressure of having to purchase new uniform and school supplies often provides additional stressors during the later part of the school summer holiday. A recent survey of 1000 parents, nationally weighted, conducted by the Gekko Group (2024) showed that parents back-to-school spending averages £452.40 per child, the equivalent of £2.3 billion nationally. The average spend on school backpacks was £40.70 with stationery costing an additional £34 per child (Gekko Group, 2024). The survey revealed that the cost-of-living crisis is still taking a toll on parents, with nearly three quarters agreeing that rising costs have made it much harder to afford back-to-school purchases.

Approximately 61% of parents were worried about school related costs such as uniforms, sports equipment, school bags, stationery etc, and one third of parents reported that they would be relying on savings to cover these costs. It is worth noting that this survey was nationally weighted, hence we would anticipate a higher level of parental concern for households in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), families living in poverty, not in receipt of FSM and families with little or no savings.

The latter part of the school holidays is also a period where HAF provision and attendance declines. Building upon our prior research that identified that children attending HAF, alongside their parents would like support at meeting the annual costs associated with returning to school, the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University partnered with Love Amelia, a local charity in the North East of England, to explore an intervention which aimed to provide children with a choice of school backpack, packed with school essentials to support them in their return to school following the summer school holiday. It was anticipated that this intervention would a) alleviate financial strain and b) improve confidence, self-esteem and c) raise children's aspirations to return to school for the Autumn term.

The Intervention

Love, Amelia is a Sunderland-based charitable organisation dedicated to providing essential support to families and children, particularly those facing socio-economic disadvantages. Working with children aged 0-16 years throughout the North East region, Love, Amelia's objectives are the prevention and relief of poverty through the provision of essential items and services to children and their families. The charity strives to ensure that every child has equal access to opportunities in life, focusing on reducing the impacts of poverty and overcoming barriers to thrive.

The School Bag Project by Love, Amelia aims to address unmet community needs for essential school supplies and support pupils' readiness for school. This initiative targeted both material and psychological barriers to educational access, equipping children with the necessary tools for academic success while alleviating the stigma associated with financial hardship. Driven by a community-oriented approach, the project sought to bridge gaps in educational resources, reduce inequalities, and create a sense of value and inclusion among children in their learning environments.



The project was co-developed with input from a broad range of stakeholders, including families supported by Love, Amelia, who highlighted the adverse effects on children lacking basic school supplies. Parents, carers, children, and school staff alike shared insights on the direct impact of resource shortages on children's educational experiences. Some children reported missing learning opportunities, facing repeated detentions, or even suspensions due to missing essential items like pens, rulers, calculators, and uniforms.

Children disclosed that they often withheld information about their school needs to avoid burdening parents and carers, who were financially constrained. This lack of resources not only hindered their ability to engage in learning but also heightened their feelings of anxiety, embarrassment and social stigma. Children frequently reported stigma around not having supplies, with some experiencing bullying and feelings of shame, describing it as being "punished for being poor."

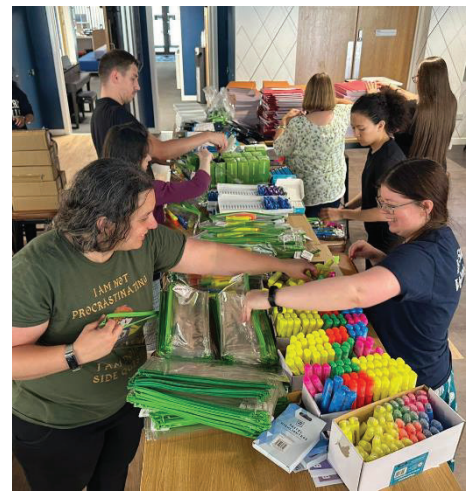


The project collaborated with 17 schools in Sunderland, which provided insights into the required supplies for classroom use, homework, and exam preparation. Additional feedback was gathered from 14 local families and 23 professionals to identify specific items children would need to support learning and development. With these insights, Love, Amelia crafted a packing list of school supplies tailored to each Key Stage level (KS1-4), including age-appropriate essentials such as pens, pencils, and workbooks. This list was then shared with the schools, families, and professionals to ensure it accurately reflected the local community's needs.

After the list was refined and approved, Love, Amelia partnered with local suppliers and businesses to source materials and select suitable backpacks. A variety of unbranded backpacks were chosen to protect the anonymity and dignity of recipients. Bags for younger children featured bright colours and playful designs, while bags for older students were neutral. Each child could choose a backpack based on their own personal preferences, providing ownership and autonomy of choice.



The backpacks were filled with school essentials, including stationery items (pens, pencils, rulers, rubbers highlighters etc), calculators and maths sets, revision materials, reusable water bottles, lined and gridded notebooks. Additionally, each bag contained information about local support services and a feedback card with a QR code linked to an online evaluation form (also available as a paper copy), allowing recipients to share their experiences with the project.



Coproduction with parents, children and schools within local communities was vital to ensuring that the aims and objectives of the project could be fulfilled. In addition, many local businesses, educational suppliers, and community members contributed supplies in-kind. This support maximised the project's reach and supported community engagement and uptake. Working together, Love, Amelia staff and volunteers, and staff from corporate partners assembled the backpacks with care.



In total, 2,000 backpacks were distributed through Sunderland City Council's HAF programme, with the HAF leads in Together for Children supporting coordination and delivery of the backpacks to the organisations delivering HAF. Distribution took place in the two weeks prior to commencement of the Autumn term, ensuring that children were well-prepared for their return to school. An additional 50 backpacks were directly distributed to Sunderland families identified as in need through Love, Amelia's referral pathways.



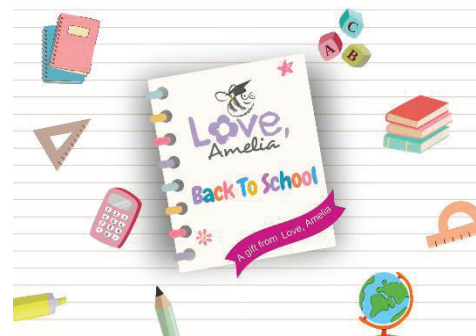
Evaluation

Design and participants

This pilot study adopted a self-completion online survey design and used non-probability purposive sampling to collect data from parents whose children attended HAF in Sunderland and who were part of the charitable intervention (i.e. those parents whose children received a free backpack). Within each backpack provided, parents were provided with a link to the online survey and a paper-based version of the same survey. Parents and caregivers were asked to complete one survey based on their eldest child who a) attended HAF and b) received a school backpack. When participants accessed and consented to participate in the online survey, the online system automatically generated each individual a participant number. For paper versions, participant numbers were generated manually upon data entry. Participants were removed from the database if they did not subsequently answer any online survey questions. Both online responses and paper survey returns were checked for duplication by matching post codes. These controls resulted in no participants being withdrawn from the data base. Demographic information was provided by 265 participants, who identified as male (n= 45), female (n = 220), other (n= 0) or preferred not to say (n=0) and were aged between 16 and 62 years or age, with a mean age of 35. Participants reported that they were Asian (n= 26), Black (n= 66), Mixed (n= 4), White (n = 166), other (n= 0), or preferred not to say (n= 3). The relationship to the eldest child was, Father (n=44), Mother (n =207), Aunt/Auntie (n = 3), Carer (n =1), Grand parent (n =9), Prefer not to say (n =1).

Survey

The online survey was hosted on Qualtrics and was accessible on a computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone. Both the online and paper version of the survey included 15 questions. Whilst closed questions were primarily included, there was one open ended question that allowed participants to explain their responses: "Please use this space to tell us anything else you wish to share about the school backpack your child/children received from Love Amelia". All participation was voluntary, and participants were not provided a financial incentive for taking part in the study. The online survey



was active between 1st August and 31st September 2024. The paper version of the same survey was active for the same period, but postal returns were accepted until 14th October 2024.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee at Northumbria University (reference number: 33684). A draft survey was piloted by 5 experienced researchers and 5 naïve participants to eliminate system faults and enhance clarity of survey questions. The link to the online survey, and a paper survey, was included in each school backpack distributed to children. On the first page of the survey, an information sheet and consent form were presented. For the online survey, if participants did not consent, 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. The main questions regarded the usefulness of the intervention, and the perceived impacts of the intervention for children and parents, and carers. Participants were additionally asked to provide personal demographic information (e.g. gender, ethnicity, and relationship to child) as well as household postcode. In total the survey took 5 minutes to complete. A debrief sheet was presented on the last page of the survey.

Data Analysis

Postcode data were checked to verify that participants did a) not complete the survey twice and b) that all households were located within the geographic boundaries covered by Sunderland City Council.

Responses from closed questions were coded and analysed using SPSS version 20 and are presented as descriptive statistics and frequency tables. There were no incomplete responses, and all participants' responses are included in the final analysis. For the open-ended question, data were coded and collated to form common categories.

In terms of the backpack and its contents, the findings showed that the addition of a new school backpack was regarded as a good addition to HAF, with over 99% of parents and carers either strongly agreeing or agreeing (see Table 1).

Table 1. The percentage of parents who agreed that the school backpack was a good addition to HAF.

School backpack was a good addition to HAF

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	15	5.7	5.7	5.7
	Strongly agree	249	94.0	94.0	99.6
	Strongly disagree	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	265	100.0	100.0	

Similar findings are reported in terms of whether their child liked the backpack (see Table 2). In order to provide some degree of agency, children were allowed to select their backpack of choice.

Table 2: Parent's perceptions on whether their child like the backpack provided

My child liked the backpack

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	5	1.9	1.9	1.9
	Strongly agree	259	97.7	97.7	99.6
	Strongly disagree	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	265	100.0	100.0	

The contents of the backpack were also thought to be useful, with nearly 100% agreement (see Table 3).

Table 3: Parent's perception on whether the contents of the backpack are useful

The contents of the backpack were useful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	5	1.9	1.9	1.9
	Strongly agree	259	97.7	97.7	99.6

Strongly disagree	1	.4	.4	100.0
Total	265	100.0	100.0	

Similar levels of agreement are reported by parents either strongly agreeing or agreeing that having a new backpack and new contents supported their child's confidence (see Table 4), self-esteem (see Table 5) and aspirations (see Table 6).

Table 4: Parent's perceptions of whether receipt of the backpack improved their child's confidence

Having the new backpack improved my child's confidence					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	46	17.4	17.4	17.4
	Neither agree nor disagree	1	.4	.4	17.7
	Somewhat agree	1	.4	.4	18.1
	Strongly agree	216	81.5	81.5	99.6
	Strongly disagree	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	265	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Parent's perceptions of whether receipt of the backpack improved their child's self-esteem.

Improved my child's self-esteem					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	7	2.6	2.6	2.6
	Neither agree nor disagree	14	5.3	5.3	7.9
	Somewhat agree	11	4.2	4.2	12.1
	Strongly agree	232	87.5	87.5	99.6
	Strongly disagree	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	265	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Parent's perception of whether receipt of the backpack improved their child's aspirations

Raised my child's aspirations

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	11	4.2	4.2	4.2
	Neither agree nor disagree	3	1.1	1.1	5.3
	Somewhat agree	4	1.5	1.5	6.8
	Strongly agree	246	92.8	92.8	99.6
	Strongly disagree	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	265	100.0	100.0	

In addition to supporting children, parents also agreed that the backpack helped to alleviate household financial strain, with 96% of parents strongly agreeing with this statement.

Table 7. Parent's perception on whether the backpack alleviated financial strain within the household

Alleviated financial strain

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	7	2.6	2.6	2.6
	Somewhat agree	3	1.1	1.1	3.8
	Strongly agree	255	96.2	96.2	100.0
	Total	265	100.0	100.0	

Qualitative Findings

Over 30 participants responded to the open-ended question that asked them to elaborate on their experience of the intervention. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes: Need; Suitability of the backpacks and contents; and emotional and developmental support.

Need:

The responses to the open-ended question revealed a high level of need, mostly driven by lack of disposal household income:

“These are wonderful. I could never had afforded to buy everything my 3 kids needed. Thank you they've really helped me and my children” (P1).

“Today we received school bags for our children, and it was a great blessing because there was almost nothing for them for school” (P96).

“Buying school supplies is very expensive and difficult for me and my family. These have been a huge help. My kids have what they need for school, and I don't have to worry about how I am going to afford everything. Thank you” (P26).



Suitability of the backpacks and contents:



Nearly all participants thought that the quality and quantity of stationery supplies was excellent.

“When the items arrived for my daughters, I was surprised at the quantity and quality. They are new. Thank you Amelia” (P73).

“Very well put together backpack with all the essentials a child will need for going back to school” (P91).

“The calculator and stationery was especially very much appreciated thank you” (P51).

Emotional and Developmental Support:

Many parents and carers referred to how the backpacks had helped to support their child's return to school, engagement in educational activities, and how the backpacks had alleviated parental/carers concerns and worries.

"I was overwhelmed to receive the bags as I could see all of them are useful for my children's milestone development. Thank you very much for the love & support" (P218).

"Thank you, the bag has really helped for my daughter starting school" (P146).

"Love, Amelia provided loads of items for my children saving us from stress and worry about money and how to get the stuff we need. Many thanks." (P201).

"It was a lovely addition to the HAF programme the kids were delighted with the contents and couldn't wait to do maths on the white boards provided. It was a lovely touch and much appreciated thank you". (P212).



Discussion

Overall, the findings of this pilot study are extremely promising. Both the quantitative and qualitative data support the need for such, or similar, interventions to be more widely available in Sunderland and across other local authorities. Indeed, given the level of deprivation of families who

attend the national HAF programme, combined with the stressors of parents constantly trying to cope across the UK (Shinwell & Defeyter, 2021), the children's own reported feelings about attending school without the correct 'tools', and the need to invest in children to drive educational capital, to decrease the educational attainment gap and to improve social mobility, the authors argue that such an intervention is worthy of further exploration and possible wider roll out across England as part of the HAF programme.

Whilst HAF and HAF Plus (variant HAF model for older children) delivers a range of positive benefits, from free childcare, to improved dietary intake and increased participation in physical activities, the pressure for parents of having to purchase school uniform and supplies towards the end of the summer school holiday remains a significant financial strain on households, and anecdotal data from parents and teachers, alongside the Gekko Group (2024) survey, shows that this is a significant challenge for many families.

The level of need across Sunderland, and arguably all areas where HAF is being delivered, for these essential school materials is overwhelming and this pilot project could have been ten-fold in terms of capacity in order to meet the need of HAF participants in Sunderland. We propose that this intervention provides children with some of the essential materials needed to engage with school in a positive manner and that such interventions are essential to a) supporting children in their return to school both in terms of physical resources but also improved self-esteem, b) enabling children to go to school with a sense of pride, reduced social stigma, and thus promoting engagement in education, and c) reducing financial household strain and parental stress. Ensuring that such programmes are delivered in a dignified and inclusive, co-produced manner is imperative. Distributing brand new school backpacks full of newly bought essentials is one small step in supporting children, in a dignified manner, to attend school.

Although we did not include teachers in this survey, feedback from teaching staff has been very positive. Teachers report that for many children having a new, smart backpack with new stationery is important to their overall confidence and self-esteem, especially as these materials are used on a daily basis. The pre-intervention collaboration and co-production workshops between Love Amelia and local schools helped the charity to identify suitable backpacks, materials, and suppliers. Many local businesses, not previously involved in HAF, saw this as a way that they could support parents (and the HAF programme) in their local community. This approach could be easily replicated in different local authorities as part of local based solutions, that could be incorporated within the DfE's national HAF programme, through working in partnership with local schools, parent bodies, children, businesses and charities.

Further work is required to a) fund the intervention at scale and b) further evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention across a wider range of outcome measures. However, this pilot programme has demonstrated a significant need within HAF and communities for such an intervention. The intervention integrated seamlessly into the HAF programme delivery, and produced very promising preliminary findings. Given the need to address the high rates of school non-attendance, and to counteract the high costs of providing children with yearly essentials to return to school after the summer school holiday, ensuring that pupils and their families are supported through such programmes warrants further consideration and exploration.

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