

Disabled children's access to play and activities

July 2026

Table of contents

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza.....	3
Executive Summary	5
1. Disabled children’s views on play.....	7
1.1 A lack of holiday clubs and after-school activities for disabled children	8
1.2 Parks and playgrounds.....	12
2. Holiday Activities and Food Programme.....	15
2.1 The benefits of attending a HAF for children with disabilities	16
2.2 Disabled children’s access to HAF	16
3. Recommendations.....	20
3.1 Consistent offer of enrichment activities for disabled children.....	20
3.2 A fully inclusive HAF programme.....	21
3.3 Accessible playgrounds.....	21
3.4 Free, accessible transport for disabled children at all hours.....	22
Methodology.....	23
References	25

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



My first act as Children's Commissioner was to listen to children. My 2021 survey of over half a million young people, The Big Ask, found that children of all backgrounds and abilities, right across the country, were happy, optimistic, and determined. But it was undeniable that some children – particularly many disabled children – face additional barriers to achieving their goals.

The voices of those children stayed with me. Since, I have undertaken studies into the lives, experiences and needs of disabled children. They have told me of schools and other public services not designed around their and their family's needs. About feeling like their uniqueness and diverse strengths weren't celebrated as they should be. In fact, sometimes they were met with hostility and closed doors. I have exposed that some children with the most complex needs are spending months, even years stuck in hospital because fundamental system failures. Too many children and parents are having to spend their lives fighting for just the basic support.

I've continued to challenge the government to do better. My School and College Census and Children's Plan showed that we do not have a system that works for children with complex needs and difficult lives. This was my message to government as it set about reforming the special education needs and disabilities system (SEND), and this is my message today.

I write this as we approach the summer holidays – a time of excitement; a chance to explore the world beyond school. I've been travelling the country to promote my final survey. From Scouts hiking Hadrian's Wall to talented young musicians in Suffolk, I love seeing joyful activities – where children are learning, making friends and getting a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves. But, sadly, for too many disabled children this is not what the start of summer feels like – too many of them tell me that they cannot even use their local playground, let alone go to a football, drama or arts club like their friends.

Many of these disabled children will also be living in families who are struggling with the cost of living – and the extra costs that disabled people face – struggling even to put food on the table. That is why part of this report focuses on the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, which aims to close the gap in children's experiences of their school holidays. I have seen first-hand how transformative it can be – bringing fun and a chance to try new things for children, and how it relieves the costs of childcare for parents. But I have heard from some children that their local holiday programmes are not accessible or are too far away. This report reveals that disabled children who are eligible for the Holiday Activities and Food programme are less likely to attend than other children – our best estimate is 14% of children with identified SEND accessed it, compared to an estimated 22% of children without SEND¹. The HAF programme has been offered to more and more children each year, I want this to continue and see disabled children guaranteed access to this wonderful programme.

That is why, I am calling for more resource to ensure that all areas are able to run fully inclusive HAFs, so that no disabled child misses out. This isn't a pipedream. There are great examples of inclusive HAFs offering adapted activities giving disabled children and their families special moments. From yoga to hockey to football. It means having fun: Doing karaoke with their friends, painting their nails and dressing up; it means being creative: Making art with new materials, doing talent shows and getting to show their friends and family what they've achieved.

Every disabled child, no matter their background, should be able to realise their right to play – because while the benefits of play, fun and connection may be hard to measure, all of us who care about children know that the freedom and opportunity to play is the true measure of a childhood well-lived.

¹ This estimate is based on LA reported data as opposed to administrative data and does not capture SEND-specialist places

Executive Summary

This report sets out the different experiences disabled children often have when trying to play, have fun and take part in local clubs and activities. The barriers they face are sadly well known: Inaccessible activities and play areas, lack of transport and lack of care provision. These challenges can be most acute for children growing up in low-income families. To understand the gap in disabled children's experience, this report includes new, unpublished data from the Department for Education showing how disabled children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to access the Holiday Activities and Food programme – a local authority run programme that is having a huge positive impact on children across the country. The recommendations in the report seek to address the concerns and hopes shared with the office in The Big Future. In summary:

1. **In the Children's Commissioner's office's national survey of children – the Big Future – disabled children and children with special educational needs have told us that they face significant barriers to play, activities and things to do outside of school.** This includes:
 - a lack of accessible and affordable activities;
 - inaccessible or expensive transport options preventing children and their families from getting out; and
 - parks and playgrounds not being accessible to disabled children.
2. **Children with special educational needs and disabilities could be less likely to have accessed the Holiday Activities and Food Programme than children without identified SEND.** An estimated minimum of 14% of children with special educational needs or disabilities eligible for Free School Meals attended a HAF programme in summer 2025, compared with an estimated 22% of children eligible for Free School Meals without SEND. This means tens of thousands of children with special educational needs and disabilities could be missing out on the HAF programme because of the disparities in access. This figure has been estimated using self reported data and therefore caution has to be taken in interpreting this figure

3. The following changes must be made by government to give disabled children the same opportunities for fun, play and community:

- The Department of Culture, Media and Sport should introduce a national funding formula for youth provision to ensure availability of inclusive enrichment activities for children.
- The Department for Education must sufficiently fund the Holiday Activities and Food programme to ensure local authorities can provide an inclusive programme, and close the gap in access.
- There needs to be Ministerial and Mayoral accountability for playground provision in England.
- Buses and trams should be free for disabled children at all times.

1. Disabled children's views on play

Disabled children have the same right to play as all other children, and yet they often face many more barriers in being able to realise this right. The Commissioner's work has consistently shown that while disabled children share the same hopes and aspirations as other children, they often describe a lack of accessible, affordable opportunities to have fun, take part in activities and spend time with friends.¹

Having sufficient activities available is an essential part of realising this right to play, but disabled children also face other practical barriers to participating in those activities – including inaccessible facilities and play areas, poverty, transport costs and a lack of care provision.

In May, the Children's Commissioner launched a survey of children in England, The Big Future, which is open until October this year.² Responses so far speak to a divide in how children will get to spend their time during the upcoming summer holidays. Children and their families want to see change: more accessible activities that are affordable, more welcoming and accessible play areas *and* better transport to get to them.

The Big Future

The Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza has launched The Big Future Survey to hear from children and young people across England.

The survey is running from May to October 2026.

Children can complete the survey or have an adult complete the survey on their behalf here: [About this survey: The Big Future survey - have your say!](#)

1.1 A lack of holiday clubs and after-school activities for disabled children

The Big Future asks children what would make their local area better, and what the government should do to make their future better. Children, and adults responding on their behalf, have told us about the serious lack of after-school and holiday activities available to disabled children that are accessible and affordable.

Lack of opportunities to take part in activities, play and attend local clubs

One of the themes among children with special educational needs and disabilities taking part so far is simply a lack of activities they can take part in,

“There should be more access to sports, drama, music and youth clubs and activities after school and at the weekends/in the holidays ... Children in special schools need more access to these kinds of extracurricular activities too as they are very limited for this group of children and young people.” – Adult on behalf of 14-year-old boy with SEND.

The survey's comments highlight different activities children would benefit from, as well as specific activities that bring together children with disabilities and additional needs in their area:

“Make a club that happens once a week for people with special needs in the Community Centre that involve quiet spaces, sensory toys and fidgets, and a story read by a volunteer at the end before everyone goes home”- Boy, 11, with SEND.

In England, some disabled children who are entitled to Free School Meals will be able to access Holiday Activity and Food programmes offered by their local authorities. Some disabled children, often those with the highest needs, may be entitled to 'short breaks' paid for by their local authority which can sometimes provide opportunities for fun and play.

In addition to these government funded programmes, the voluntary and charity sector is a vital part of how disabled children have fun and take part in activities. Many organisations provide programmes of art, sport, culture, games, learning and socialising for children who need additional support and adapted activities.

These organisations also provide for children who have some of the most acute and complex needs. Voluntary sector hospices, for example, often have the training, equipment – including play equipment – for children with complex medical needs to enable them to play and have fun.

The sector is funded by a patchwork of different funding streams, from government grants and local authority funding, to charitable fundraising and corporate sponsorship. This means some areas will have more on offer for children than others, and some families might not be able to afford these activities.

Unaffordability

The unaffordability of the activities and clubs available to children is another theme raised in The Big Future responses. Families responding on behalf of their children described the gap in accessible and affordable things to do.

“[I would like] Accessible music clubs for low-income families. Wider range of youth clubs and holiday clubs for a range of abilities and finances.” – Adult on behalf of 12-year-old child with SEND.

The added cost of these activities creates another barrier to taking part.

“[I would like] free / cheap clubs that I can go. Like dancing, gymnastics, crafts or even martial arts. All the clubs in the area that do these things can be quite expensive for me and my sisters.” – Adult on behalf of 7-year-old girl with SEND

Some parents highlighted how their child was not able to access some of the free or affordable provision provided by local authorities for disabled children through their short breaks services – services which are often only available to families with some of the highest needs.

“More holiday clubs and other clubs for SEND kids that are funded. Some you can only go to if LA will pay and not everyone gets short breaks” – Adult on behalf of 10-year-old boy with SEND.

Families of disabled children can face a higher cost of living because of costs associated with disability, like higher bills for equipment, increased transport costs and caring responsibilities that prevent parents from working.³ Despite the benefits and support some families are entitled to, including Disability Living Allowance and personal budgets, statistics show that households including disabled children, disabled adults or both have higher poverty rates than those where no one is disabled.⁴ This means that taking part in activities, even funded activities, can be a significant challenge if it means parents have to take time off work, or cover the costs of getting to the activity.

Isolation

The survey responses brought out how going to clubs outside of term time is not just about having fun, but getting to meet and play with other children. This can be particularly important for disabled children who, rather than going to their local mainstream school, may travel long distances to get to a special school, and so live far from their classmates they usually see every day.

“More activities for send children especially in the holidays when I am far from my school friends and don’t have any local friends.” - Adult of behalf of 14-year-old boy with SEND.

Responses show that having a special educational need and disability can mean you cannot take part in activities other children can, worsening feelings of loneliness.

“There isn't much for me to do, I can't go to holiday club or to activities after school because I have a TA [teaching assistant]. My mummy does lots of fun things with me but I have no brothers and no sisters only my cat and so I get lonely. I would like to be able to do some of the activities my friends do like football after school.” – Adult of behalf of 8-year-old boy with SEND.

One of the barriers to children taking part in these activities is because most disabled children and children with special educational needs will not get further support outside of school. They may have a 1:1 support in school, or attend special school, but at home their family will provide the hands-on care to ensure their personal care needs are met, help them eat, keep them safe and help them play and have fun. Some children will need more than one person to help them. For children who do receive care and support from a care worker or nurse, they will have a set number of hours over a week or month – and it is often not enough, or can be unreliable.⁵

Families' caring responsibilities mean that disabled children might not be able to do fun things, like a sports club where children go without their parents, or go to a playground, when one parent cannot look after their disabled child and their sibling at the same time while outside. Children with complex medical needs whose parents provide constant, intense care might rarely be able to leave the house at all.⁶

Lack of viable, accessible transport

A fundamental barrier brought to light in many of the responses is a lack of accessible public transport to get to activities and clubs,

“There are no holiday clubs near my house, and we do not have a car so I can't go to one. It isn't very safe to walk around” – Adult on behalf of 9-year-old boy with SEND

Disabled people face difficulties across multiple modes of transport, and travel less than the non-disabled people as a result.⁷ Research shows that in the UK, a third of young disabled people aged 15 to

24 were forced to reduce their journeys due to financial constraints.⁸ Even when public transport can work for children with disabilities – who might not be able to walk or cycle – they can face additional costs trying to get around.

"Let me use my disability bus pass before 9:30am because I'm still disabled in the mornings" - Boy, 13

In England, disabled children who qualify for a disability bus pass travel free on buses between 9:30 am and 11 pm on weekdays, and all day on weekends – although extra concessions are given by some local authorities.⁹ Buses do not service all parts of the country and getting to places before 9:30 am is a necessity for many families where children are going to childcare, school or holiday activities.

1.2 Parks and playgrounds

As well as taking part in clubs and activities, The Big Future survey has highlighted how children want to be able to use their local playground. Responses demonstrate the lack of access children with disabilities have to simply getting to go to their local park.

Lack of accessible parks and playgrounds

The office has heard that there are not enough parks and playgrounds that are accessible to disabled children,

"More accessible parks for visually impaired children" – Boy with SEND, 13

"If there was more play park that cater for children with disabilities especially wheelchair users." – Adult on behalf of 15-year-old boy with SEND

Accessible play areas can have multiple different features, and respondents to the survey wanted parks to have more accessible equipment for children with disabilities to play with:

“More accessible parks for wheelchair /mobile aids users that’s not just a wheelchair swing” – Boy with SEND, 7

Some responses mentioned features like communication boards that can help children with different communication needs play together:

“Parks with equipment for disabled children. Swings for wheelchair users. Slides for wheelchair users. Roundabouts. Communication boards at parks.” – Girl, 10, with SEND

Playgrounds in poor condition

Rubbish in playgrounds can be dangerous for any child using it, and as one parent highlighted – this danger can be more acute for children with limited mobility and children with learning disabilities:

“Rubbish everywhere in the area makes it hard to play outside especially as children with mobility issues spend time on floors or can easily put things in their mouth” – Adult on behalf of 7-year-old boy with SEND.

When parks are not kept in good condition it affects all children, but for children who use wheelchairs and for children, parks in disrepair can stop them playing completely by stopping them from entering the play area.

“Space near home to be better kept, more special needs or accessible parks, pathways maintained for wheelchairs” - Boy with SEND, 14

Some of the features that respondents described as needed were about simply keeping children safe:

“Make sure all playground and play areas have fences with gate, severe learning disabilities children tend to run off and they are more vulnerable in every way” – Adult on behalf of 12-year-old boy with SEND

There is no complete data on the accessibility of parks and playgrounds for children who use wheelchairs, but accessible provision can be few and far between. A 2023 investigation by the charity Scope found a mixed picture among the around 1,000 UK playgrounds visited.¹⁰ This inequality can stop children being able to play and do the same things as their siblings and parents.

2. Holiday Activities and Food Programme

The school holidays should be a time for fun and a chance for children to play, try new things and make and spend time with friends. Time off school feels very different for some children. For them, the weeks without going to school every day can mean feeling hungry, having little to do and feeling isolated.¹¹ The extra pressure school holidays put on some families creates a gap between children who can enjoy their time away from the classroom, and those who cannot.

First set up in 2018 by the Department for Education (DfE), the Holiday and Activities Food (HAF) programme aims to close the gap in children's experiences of their school holidays. The programme provides support to children in England who receive free school meals and has been shown to be associated with multiple positive effects on children and their parents¹², including alleviating hunger among children¹³, increasing their physical activity and improving parental wellbeing.¹⁴

Programmes delivered by local authorities are varied: Sport, arts, outdoor activities and learning new skills are many of the activities offered to children. Getting meals throughout the day, and a chance to learn more about food and cooking are also key parts of many HAF programmes.

The programme is not targeted at children with special educational needs and disabilities specifically, and there are no targets for their attendance. However, DfE has set out how local authorities must consider the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities, including ensuring the most vulnerable children are identified, that staff have appropriate training and that families are flexibly supported¹⁵, alongside funded the publication of a toolkit on making its delivery work for disabled children.¹⁶ Local authorities are funded based on need, and given the flexibility to use 15% of their funding to support children who are not eligible for free school meals who might otherwise fall through gaps in provision.

The HAF programme can make a substantial difference to the lives of children growing up in low-income families. But the programme faces challenges when it comes to ensuring disabled children from low-income homes can also benefit.

2.1 The benefits of attending a HAF for children with disabilities

Being able to attend a HAF programme can mean children with special education needs and disabilities are able to have a fun, enriching, varied and social time off school, getting to eat good food and have somewhere other than school and home that's part of their life.

At one provider, children told us that they enjoyed doing varied activities, this included learning yoga from a yoga teacher who adapted the sessions for the children; playing sports like football, boxing and hockey; making art, including drawing and making a tapestry; playing with Lego; doing drama; cooking and playing restaurants.

Children told us that what they liked about going to the activity club was meeting and seeing friends, and taking part in group activities. They told us about specific activities that made them happy: painting their nails, looking at books about periods of history, getting to relax outside, and singing karaoke.

Some of the children we spoke to said that the activity club was 'more fun than school'. They enjoyed having a separate space to being at school and being able to make new friends.

The young people showed us the scrap books that were made at the end of the holiday clubs, and they liked being able to look back at what they had done, talk about the friends they spent time with and share memories with other people.

2.2 Disabled children's access to HAF

There are multiple barriers disabled children face when trying to take part in fun and activities, and this intensifies for children growing up in low-income families.

Statistics on the characteristics of pupils receiving SEN support/Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) show that the link between SEND and poverty is particularly strong, with 45.3% of pupils with an EHC

plan and 39.8% of pupils with SEN support being eligible for free school meals. This compares to 22.7% of pupils with no identified SEN.¹⁷

Indicative unpublished figures shared with the office from the Department for Education show that the majority of HAF attendees do not self-report having special educational needs and disabilities.²

In summer 2025, an estimated 22% of all children eligible for Free School Meals attended HAFs versus an estimated minimum of 14% of children with special educational needs and disabilities eligible for Free School Meals – making children with SEND a third less likely to attend.³ This means that tens of thousands of children with special educational needs and disabilities could be missing out on the HAF programme⁴.

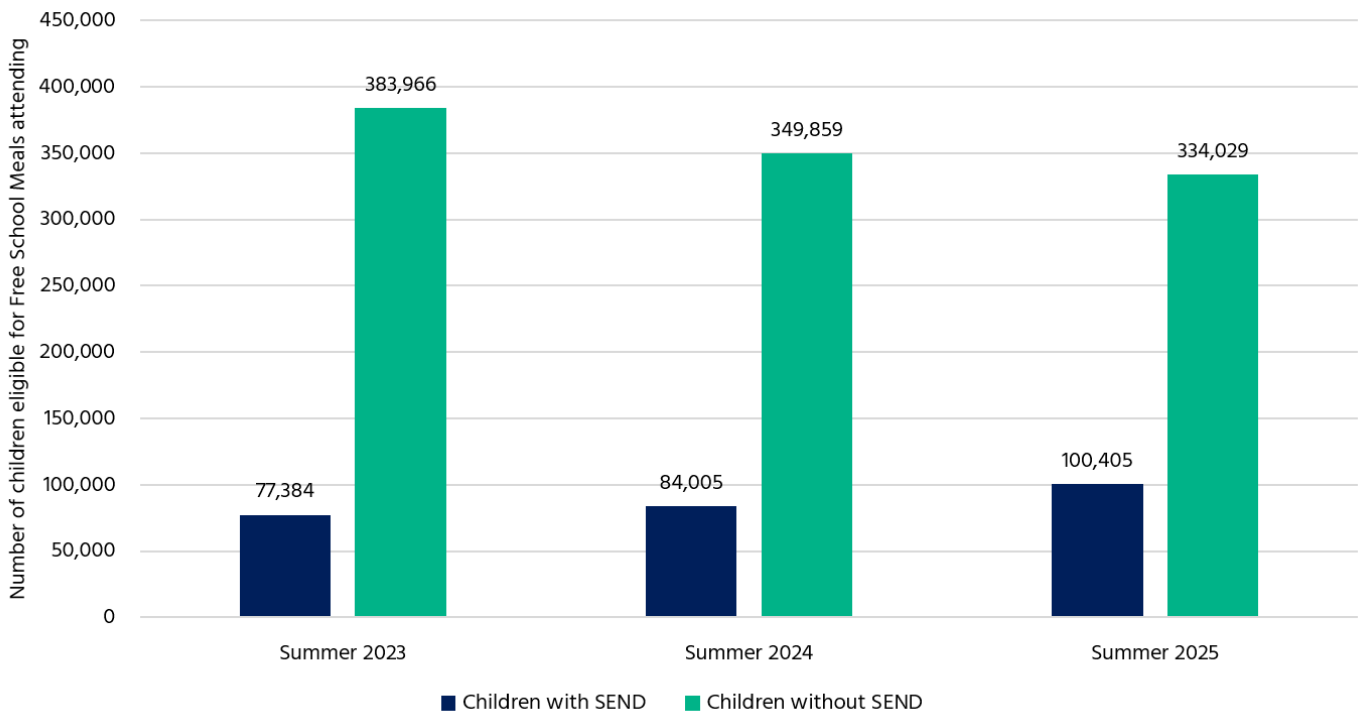
There has been a positive trend of rising numbers of children who are accessing the HAF programme, including children with special educational needs and disabilities eligible for Free School Meals accessing HAFs, reaching as high as around 100,000 in summer 2025 from around 77,000 in summer 2023 (Figure 1).

² Data is collected when parents or children choose to report their SEND status to the HAF provider, or where children attend specialist provision. This is likely to be an underestimate of the total number of children with SEND accessing HAF.

³ The data covers attendances rather than unique children, and data is not available centrally on the numbers of children who attend one, two or all three of Easter, Summer and/or Winter HAFs. Given this, the Children's Commissioner's office estimated the number of children eligible for FSM with and without SEND who attended HAF programmes from Easter 2023 to Christmas 2025 inclusive, assuming different children attended each year. For children who are FSM eligible without SEND, the estimated number was over 1 million, while this was lower for FSM eligible children with SEND, at around 300,000 to around 500,000 depending on the extent to which children return to HAFs more than once within a year.

⁴ Estimate of 56,548 based on the difference between children with reported SEND and without reported SEND currently accessing HAF provision.

Figure 1: Children eligible for Free School Meals accessing HAFs by SEND status, 2023 to 2025



Source: Children's Commissioner's office analysis of indicative, unpublished HAF management data from Department for Education.

Note: Children's SEND status is as reported by parents booking onto HAF programmes

However, most children eligible for Free School Meals, both with and without special educational needs and disabilities are not accessing a HAF programme. The office estimates, based on published and unpublished Department for Education data for 2022/23 to 2025/26, that an additional half a million children with SEND would meet the inclusion criteria for HAF but are not currently accessing it.

What are the barriers?

In conversations with professionals working for HAF providers and local authority programme coordinators, the office heard that setting up and delivering holiday activity and food provision for disabled children required more resources, specific training, careful planning and – to be effective – a transport offer.

Transport

Having transport to take children to the HAF programme and back home was explained as key to ensuring children who live across a large local authority area can access the specialist, and so less local, programmes. Without it, children need to travel long distances that could take hours, with the support of their parents. Many families will not have a car or be able to afford the additional costs of transport over these long distances. The additional impracticality of taking hours away from parents who need to work while their children attend the programmes is also key.

Transport adds significant costs to the running of a HAF programme. These costs also include staff who need to be there to support children who may have medical conditions or behavioural needs. Professionals the office spoke to told us about the different ways they fund their transport offer, because funding from the HAF programme does not cover it.

Higher staff costs

Children with special educational needs and disabilities will need more support to engage in activities, and often support to meet their personal care needs. Staff ratios will be higher in specialist HAF provision for disabled children, and where disabled children attend a 'mainstream' HAF provider with additional support.

Funding for local authorities does not account for some children needing more support, this can affect how many children, both with and without special educational needs and disabilities, are able to access their local HAF programme.

Training

Staff working in providers that are set up for child with SEND to attend may require additional training – whether that be to communicate with children, undertake personal care or help children with medical conditions. The office was told by professionals running one HAF programme that by employing staff that worked in local special schools, the provider was able to ensure staff were fully equipped to provide the necessary support to children attending.

Tailored provision

Knowing the children attending holiday activity and food programmes is key to their success – gathering this information and setting out a plan is more resource intensive for providers that work with disabled children. Understanding their needs and getting their support right is essential to ensure children's health, safety and how they can meaningfully engage in the HAF programme, and providers need the resources to do this.

3. Recommendations

All disabled children should be able to enjoy their holidays, make friends and be able to realise their right to play. For those disabled children living in lower income families, it is particularly important that there are free, fully resourced activities that children can participate in.

3.1 Consistent offer of enrichment activities for disabled children

There needs to be funding for enrichment activities that ensures appropriate provision for children with disabilities – building on the strengths of the voluntary and charity sector.

Recommendation: As part of its efforts to deliver the National Youth Strategy, the government should introduce a national formula for funding local youth provision that is based on the child population and takes into account the number of children in the area with an Education, Care and Health Plan and Special Educational Need support in school, and the number of children in receipt of Free School Meals to ensure the accessibility of local provision.

How should progress be measured?

- Number of children who are satisfied with the things to do in their local area reported in national surveys, broken down by demographics including special education need and disability.
- Number of children regularly attending enrichment activities, such as art, drama or sport, broken down by demographics including special education need and disability.

3.2 A fully inclusive HAF programme

It is welcome that the HAF programme already provides support to so many children with identified Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, but more should be done to ensure no child misses out.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should collect data on how many children are eligible to attend the HAF programme who have an EHCP, Special Educational Need support in school and who attend a special school. This should be used to decide the resourcing for the HAF programme so that all local authorities are sufficiently resourced to deliver HAF programmes to children with disabilities; this must include funding for transport (and transport staffing) for disabled children who would otherwise not be able to access the programme.

How should progress be measured? Through Department for Education data collection on HAF attendance by eligible children who have a special educational need and disability.

3.3 Accessible playgrounds

Too often, disabled children are excluded from accessing playgrounds. The only data on playground accessibility has been gathered by a nationwide exercise undertaken by Scope. There is no clear government accountability for the provision of playgrounds in England, and how accessible they are to disabled children.

Recommendation: There needs to be clear delivery and accountability structures at local level for ensuring there are enough playgrounds for children that are accessible. Local councils and ultimately Mayors should know how many playground there are in their area, what state the playgrounds are in, and their accessibility level. They should be held responsible for the building and improvement of playgrounds.

How should progress be measured? The government should gather complete playground accessibility data from local authorities and make this public, enabling local populations to find their nearest accessible playground, and hold their local councillors and Mayors to account.

3.4 Free, accessible transport for disabled children at all hours

Disabled children are more likely to need to use public transport, and will need to use buses and trams at all times of day.

Recommendation: Buses and trams should be free for disabled children at all hours through an update to the Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007.

How should progress be measured? Implementation of mandated free travel for disabled children on buses and trams.

Methodology

This report is based on analysis of unpublished data on the HAF programme provided to the Children's Commissioner's office by the Department for Education; analysis of early written comments among responses to the Children's Commissioner's survey The Big Future; and a visit to a provider of a HAF programme and after-school club in June 2026..

Quantitative

In June 2026 the Department for Education provided unpublished data to the Children's Commissioner's office on the number of children, by holiday period (Easter, Summer and Christmas), for each of 2023, 2024 and 2025, in each of the following groups: HAF funded, non-HAF funded, FSM, SEND, and FSM-eligible SEND. This data was provided to the Department by local authorities, and the Department notes it has not verified children's circumstances, which may not capture all children with SEND, due to the self-reporting nature of the underlying data (i.e. what parents and carers disclose, when signing their children up for the programme).

An unknown level of children attend HAF programmes during more than one holiday period in a given year. Sensitivity analysis therefore covered the possibility that the same children attend all three programmes in a year (to calculate minimum coverage estimates), and the possibility that entirely different groups of children attend in the Summer, Christmas and Easter holidays (to calculate maximum estimates).

Academic years (August to July) are matched to HAF data for Summer, Christmas, and the following Easter. For example, 2024/25 covers Summer 2024 (preceding the start of the academic year), Christmas 2024, and Easter 2025.

The analysis draws on Department for Education official statistics covering the number of pupils in England with SEN support or an EHCP, including the Free School Meals eligibility status. These SEND statuses are based on nursery, school and college records and so may not correspond to the HAF data, and neither capture children and young people's identities or self definitions.

Qualitative

The Children's Commissioner's office visited a provider of a HAF programme and after-school club in June 2026 and spoke to children, young people, and provider and local authority professionals.

The Children's Commissioner launched The Big Future survey on 9th May 2026 to hear from all children in England about their lives, their local areas and their hopes for the future.

This report contains quotes from and thematic analysis of written comments received before the 22nd June 2026 from children and adults responding on behalf of children in response to two open-text questions:

- What would make your local area better?
- What should the government do to make your future better?

Comments have been edited for clarity in some cases. The Big Future does not ask adults responding on behalf of children whether they are parents, or, for example, foster carers, teachers, or social workers. However, 92% of adult respondents to the previous similar survey by the Children's Commissioner, The Big Ambition, reported that they were parents.¹⁸ So in this report, comments from adults are attributed to 'parents'. Responses from and on behalf of children who reported they had SEND were filtered. All comments containing the following combination of key words were reviewed.

Disabled + Holiday

Disabled + Activit[ies/y]

SEND + Activit[ies/y]

And comments using the following key words were reviewed at random:

Holiday, fun, accessible, parks, play, activit[ies/y]

References

- ¹ Children's Commissioner's office, 'We all have a voice: Disabled children's vision for change', [Link](#)
- ² Children's Commissioner's office, The Big Future survey, [Link](#)
- ³ Family Fund, Cost of Caring, [Link](#)
- ⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Disability and poverty, [Link](#)
- ⁵ Children's Commissioner's office, 'We all have a voice': Disabled children's vision for change, [Link](#)
- ⁶ Children's Commissioner's office, Children waiting to leave hospital, [Link](#)
- ⁷ House of Commons, Access denied: Rights versus reality in disabled people's access to transport, [Link](#)
- ⁸ Motability Foundation, Creating an inclusive future: Addressing accessible transport needs for young disabled people 2025, [Link](#)
- ⁹ Department for Transport, Assessing eligibility of disabled people for concessionary bus travel, [Link](#)
- ¹⁰ Scope, Let's Play Fair, [Link](#)
- ¹¹ Children's Commissioner's office, Growing up in a low income family, [Link](#)
- ¹² Long MA, Stretesky PB, Graham PL, Palmer KJ, Steinbock E, Defeyter MA. The impact of holiday clubs on household food insecurity—A pilot study. *Health Soc Care Community*. 2018;26:e261–e269., [Link](#)
- ¹³ Defeyter MA, Stretesky PB, Pepper GV. A study comparing positive benefits for parents, and their children, of children attending the UK's holiday activities and food program to parents of non-attendees. *Front Public Health*. 2025 Feb 25;13:1474400. [Link](#)
- ¹⁴ Department for Education, Holiday activities and food programme 2025 to 2026 financial year, [Link](#)
- ¹⁵ Department for Education, Holiday activities and food programme 2025 to 2026 financial year, [Link](#)
- ¹⁶ Council for Disabled Children, Holiday Activities and Food Programme A toolkit for engaging and supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), [Link](#)
- ¹⁷ Department for Education, Special educational needs in England 2025/26, [Link](#)
- ¹⁸ Children's Commissioner's office, The Big Ambition: Research Report. [Link](#)



**11th Floor, 64 Victoria Street
London, SW1E 6QP**

www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

 [@childrenscommissioner](https://www.instagram.com/childrenscommissioner)

 [@ChildrensComm](https://twitter.com/ChildrensComm)

[@childrenscommissioner](https://www.instagram.com/childrenscommissioner)