



Nottingham City

FREE FUN AND FOOD

Nottingham City Council
Free Fun and Food
Annual Report 2024–2025

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Table of Contents

Section 1 - Highlights	3
Section 2 - Children and Families Feedback.....	5
Section 3 - Food.....	7
Section 4 - Enriching Activities	8
Section 5 - Physical Activities.....	10
Section 6_- Nutritional Education and Healthy Lifestyles	12
Section 7 - Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND).....	14
Section 8 - Key Challenges	16
Section 9_- Marketing and Communication	18
Section 10_- Additional Resources.....	20
Section 11- Any Other Information.....	21

Section 1

Highlights

The 2024–2025 delivery of *Free Fun and Food*, also known as the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF), in Nottingham marked a year of deepening community impact. With £1.8 million in funding from the Department for Education, Nottingham City Council successfully coordinated a city-wide programme that reached over 7,600 children and young people—primarily those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)—during the Easter, summer, October half-term, and winter holiday periods of 2024.

Over the course of the Easter, Summer October half-term, and winter holidays, we provided over 59,000 places across the city, ensuring equitable access to enriching, nutritious, and active experiences. Our delivery model was underpinned by strong partnerships with over 40 local organisations, including schools, youth services and community centres.

Centralised Booking System – Now Fully Embedded

Over the past year, Nottingham City Council has successfully embedded the centralised booking system, delivered via the Holiday Activities Platform into the core of its HAF programme operations. What began as a soft launch during Easter 2024 has now evolved into a fully integrated, city-wide solution that underpins all holiday delivery periods.

The system has significantly enhanced the user experience for families, enabling seamless eligibility checks, real-time updates, and direct communication. Strategic messaging through the platform has allowed for timely reminders, targeted outreach, and improved engagement with hard-to-reach families. Providers have also benefited from streamlined registration processes and clearer visibility of participant needs, including dietary and SEND requirements.

SEND Provision – A Standard of Inclusive Practice

SEND support is no longer an add-on but a standard feature of Nottingham’s Free Fun and Food offer. Building on the foundations laid last year, the Council has continued to expand SEND-specific places and strengthen its network of inclusive providers.

Partnerships with organisations such as Your Sports Solutions and FTM Dance have matured, with SEND Support Staff now embedded across settings. These staff members play a vital role in ensuring children with additional needs can participate confidently and safely alongside their peers.

The number of SEND-accessible places has grown, and inclusive practice is now a key criterion in provider onboarding and training. This shift has helped normalise inclusive delivery across the city and has been particularly impactful in areas with historically limited SEND provision.

School Engagement – Deepened and Sustained

School engagement with the Free Fun and Food programme has deepened over the past 12 months. The centralised booking system has enabled schools to play a more active role in identifying eligible pupils and supporting families through the registration process.

Voucher distribution is now a well-established mechanism, with schools acting as trusted intermediaries to boost awareness and uptake.

This evolution reflects a growing confidence and ownership among providers in delivering inclusive, high-quality holiday provision.



Section 2

Children and Families Feedback

General Feedback

- **Highly Positive Experience:** Many attendees described the event as “fantastic,” “lovely,” and “fabulous,” with special appreciation for the friendly staff and engaging activities.
- **Fun for All Ages:** Children and families had a great time, with lots of activities available to keep everyone entertained.
- **Food Appreciation:** The pumpkin pasta was a hit—even with picky eaters!

Holiday Activity Feedback

- **Consistent Enjoyment:** Children like Jack look forward to the sessions every school holiday, especially enjoying sports like basketball.
- **Reliable Staff:** The teams are praised for being welcoming and supportive, helping children feel comfortable and included.

Good News Stories

1. SEND Inclusion Success:

- A mother with two daughters, one with SEND, was initially hesitant due to past experiences.
- After reassurance and support from staff, both children participated fully and enjoyed the sessions.
- The younger daughter even tried a new food, and the family expressed interest in returning for summer sessions.

2. Overcoming Anxiety:

- A child with high anxiety was comforted by a tour, friendly staff, and her favourite fruit—strawberries!
- She bonded with another shy child, and they formed a new friendship, planning to attend future sessions together.

Case Studies

- **Child (Age 10):**

- Enjoyed dancing, singing, and making friends.
- Reported increased confidence and improved ability to express emotions.
- **Parent Perspective:**
 - Noted their child became more social and confident.
 - Appreciated the opportunity for their child to be active and meet new people.
 - Expressed interest in continued support and similar sessions in the future.

Quotes

“This club gave my son a reason to get up in the morning. He’s more confident, more active, and even helps with cooking now!” – Parent

“I loved the craft activities and the dance classes. I want to be a dancer!” – Child, age 9



Section 3

Food

Ensuring that every child received at least one nutritious meal per day remained a cornerstone of our programme. Working with partners such as we provided thousands of meals throughout the year.

Meals were designed to be:

- Culturally appropriate
- Balanced and appealing
- Educational

The 2024–25 Free Fun and Food programme continued to offer a diverse and appealing range of hot and cold meals, ensuring children and young people had access to nutritious and enjoyable food throughout the holidays.

A wide selection of hot dishes was served across settings, with popular options including:

- Pasta with a variety of sauces
- Jacket potatoes with assorted fillings
- Wraps with hot fillings
- Rice-based dishes
- Mild curries
- Baked beans and other warm sides

Food Preparation and Engagement

Children and young people were actively encouraged to get involved in preparing food. Activities such as chopping vegetables or assembling their own meals were especially popular. Younger children enjoyed the hands-on experience and sense of responsibility, while older participants appreciated the opportunity to personalise their meals—for example, by choosing their own toppings for pizzas or wraps.

Section 4

Enriching Activities

Over the course of 2024–25, Nottingham City Council proudly supported over 40 local organisations through the Free Fun and Food Programme. This investment enabled a rich and varied offer of free holiday activities and meals for children and young people across the city.

We partnered with organisations like Nottingham Forest Community Trust, Rattle and Roll and Nottingham Ice Centre to deliver high-quality, hands-on experiences. These activities were chosen to:

- Ensure a broad mix of physical and enrichment opportunities
- Achieve equitable access across all city wards

Our enrichment offer was designed to spark curiosity, creativity, and confidence. Activities ranged from creative arts to gardening, storytelling, and life skills sessions and included:

Creative, Educational & Cultural Enrichment

Children and young people engaged in an exciting array of hands-on, imaginative, and thought-provoking activities, including:

Arts & Expression

- Dance Drama, Singing, Theatre, Photography, Creative Writing, Sewing, Arts & Crafts

Nature

- Forest School Adventures, Bushcraft, Gardening, Eco Projects

Life Skills & Wellbeing

- Cooking Workshops, Smoothie Stations, Recipe Packs, Digital Safety, Emotional Literacy

Culture & Community

- Cultural Discovery Days, Board Games, Cinema Trips, Lego, Local Excursions

Quality & Impact

Quality Assurance visits highlighted the creativity, inclusivity, and energy of the sessions delivered. The Free Fun and Food programme continues to be a vital part of Nottingham's commitment to supporting children's health, happiness, and development during the school holidays.



Section 5

Physical Activities

A key focus of the programme was to promote active lifestyles and physical wellbeing. Providers delivered a wide spectrum of movement-based sessions, helping children build strength, coordination, and confidence. This included:

Team-Based Sports

- Football, Basketball, Cricket, Tag Rugby, Rounders, Dodgeball

Individual & Skill-Focused

- Gymnastics, Boxing, Multi-sports, Swimming, Fitness Circuits, Cycling

Outdoor & Adventure

- Nature Walks, Den Building, Gardening, Ice Skating, Trips out

Our partnership with a wide range of community partners brought professional coaches into community settings and helped us train providers in inclusive physical education.

The activities demonstrated an ability to add value, particularly where sessions were guided. For example, children were taught to ride bicycles and swim in some instances. The latter reference to swimming lessons contributes to the National Curriculum for the Key Stage 2 cohort.



Section 6

Nutritional Education and Healthy Lifestyles

Our programme extended beyond meal provision to focus on long-term education around food and health. Key components included:

- Interactive Workshops
- Cooking Classes
- Parent Engagement Sessions

These activities were designed to promote nutritional education and support healthy living. Quality assurance visits revealed a range of positive practices, including:

Child-led Snack Preparation

Children created their own snacks—such as fruit smoothies, fruit kebabs, cereal bars, and Greek salads—helping them learn about ingredients and develop food preparation skills.

Food Diaries

Children were encouraged to log and reflect on their eating habits both during and outside of Free Fun and Food provision, increasing awareness of healthy choices.

Growing Fruit and Vegetables

Activities such as growing strawberries and visiting allotments or community gardens helped children understand the journey from ‘field to fork’.

Food Education Discussions

Providers encouraged children to ask questions about their food, with staff facilitating conversations about the impact of food choices on physical and mental health.

Some of these activities included opportunities for parents and carers to participate. It was common for children to take home ingredients or leftover food to recreate recipes, supporting both family engagement and food waste reduction. Some providers also created recipe cards for families to use at home.



Section 7

Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND)

Inclusion for children and young people who are eligible for free school meals was a priority throughout our delivery ensuring:

- Tailored sessions
- 1:1 support workers
- Sensory-friendly environments

SEND support is a standard feature of Nottingham's Free Fun and Food offer. Building on the foundations laid last year, the Council has continued to expand SEND-specific places and strengthen its network of inclusive providers.

Partnerships with organisations such as Your Sports Solutions and FTM Dance have matured, with SEND Support Staff now embedded across settings. These staff members play a vital role in ensuring children with additional needs can participate confidently and safely alongside their peers.

The number of SEND-accessible places has grown, and inclusive practice is now a key criterion in provider onboarding and training. This shift has helped normalise inclusive delivery across the city and has been particularly impactful in areas with historically limited SEND provision.



Section 8

Key Challenges

While the year was a success, we faced several challenges:

Short planning windows

Project planning proved to be particularly challenging due to the late announcement of funding from the Department for Education. The delay in confirmation impacted our ability to finalise logistics, secure venues, and communicate early with families. As a result, we had to work within a compressed timeframe to organise and deliver high-quality sessions, which required significant flexibility and rapid coordination from all involved.

Engaging Secondary-Aged Children

Reaching secondary-aged children continued to present challenges, as is common across many local authorities. In Nottingham City, engagement was often lower among this age group due to several factors:

- **Parental Independence:** Older children were more likely to be left at home during school holidays, reducing participation in structured activities.
- **Scheduling Preferences:** Traditional daytime sessions were less appealing to teenagers.

To improve engagement, the Council implemented several targeted strategies:

- **Later Session Times:** Activities were scheduled later in the day to better align with the routines and preferences of older children.
- **High-Interest Activities:** More flexible and attractive options—such as ice skating and other high-value experiences—were introduced to increase appeal.

However, accurate reporting remained a challenge due to data recording limitations. When providers delivered sessions to mixed age groups, the centralised system often defaulted all participants to the primary age category, leading to underreporting of secondary-aged attendance.

Tackling Non-Attendance

Non-attendance persisted as a key issue throughout the year, despite proactive efforts to improve turnout. Many parents booked sessions but did not follow through, impacting planning and resource allocation.

To address this, the following measures were introduced:

- **Automated Reminders:** Emails and text messages were sent ahead of sessions to prompt attendance.

- Overbooking Strategy: some providers overbooked sessions to account for expected no-shows.
- Follow-Up Calls: Providers contacted parents directly when children missed sessions, helping to understand barriers and encourage future attendance.

Section 9

Marketing and Communication

Our communications strategy focused on accessibility, clarity, and reach. We used:

Collaborative Promotion and Outreach

In the lead-up to each delivery period, Nottingham City Council strengthened its collaborative efforts to raise awareness of the programme. Key partners included:

- Lead Providers
- Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Organisations

Together, they coordinated the release of joint communications, including press releases and digital content, to highlight:

- Programme activities and registration details
- Support available for families experiencing hardship during the school holidays

Cross-Departmental Coordination

To ensure a cohesive and well-targeted approach, the HAF team worked closely with internal departments such as:

- Children's Social Care Teams
- Household Support Fund Team

This cross-departmental collaboration helped maximise visibility and ensured families received consistent messaging and access to wider support services.

Marketing and Social Media

The Council's Marketing and Communications team played a key role in amplifying the programme's reach. Promotional efforts included:

- Targeted social media campaigns, to engage families directly
- Timely updates and reminders to encourage sign-ups and attendance

These efforts contributed to stronger community engagement and helped ensure families were well-informed about the opportunities available.

On-Site Family Support

- The Council supported providers by hosting **parent sign-up sessions** at delivery venues.
- These sessions helped:
 - Promote the programme
 - Assist families with registration



Section 10

Additional Resources

To ensure the continued success and development of the Free Fun and Food programme, additional specialist staffing resources were engaged to strengthen delivery across key areas:

- **Support for SEND & Vulnerable Young People:** Enhanced capacity to engage children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), ensuring inclusive access to enriching activities.
- **Inclusive Practice & Behaviour Support:** Strengthened skills in inclusive practice, with a focus on supporting children with complex needs and promoting positive engagement in mainstream settings.
- **School Partnerships:** Expanded collaboration with schools to improve reach, coordination, and continuity of support for families.

Partnership Working

Strategic partnerships remained central to the programme's delivery and long-term sustainability:

- **Lead Provider Collaboration:** Continued work with Lead Providers to mentor and support smaller VCS organisations, enhancing local capacity and ensuring broad geographical coverage.
- **Integrated SEND Support:** Strengthened links with the City Council's Short Breaks Team to align services and improve outcomes for SEND children and young people.
- **School Engagement:** Deepened engagement with schools, including academies and free schools, to foster shared planning and future joint initiatives.

Aligning with Broader Priorities

The Free Fun and Food programme was aligned with wider initiatives to maximise the impact of support for families:

- **Household Support Fund:** Promoted alongside Free Fun and Food to ensure families could access financial and practical assistance.
- **Healthy Start Programme:** Signposted to eligible families to improve access to nutritional support and healthy living resources.

These alignments helped create a more joined-up offer for families, ensuring they could benefit from a comprehensive network of support.

Section 11

Any Other Information

Looking ahead, we are committed to building on this year's success. Plans for 2025–2026 include:

- Expanding provision for secondary students
- Launch a centralised Free Fun and Food website with booking links, FAQs, and a provider map
- Utilising online tools such as MS Forms to increase productivity
- Work more closely with schools ensuring greater take up of places
- Widen the types of activities to enhance the programme and improve engagement

