



# The Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger: Evaluation Report October 2019

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## Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
The evaluation .....	3
Results.....	4
Recommendations.....	6
Section 1: Introduction.....	7
The Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger .....	7
The Essex Local Delivery Pilot.....	8
Section 2: Approach to Evaluation.....	12
Aims of the evaluation.....	12
Section 3: Systems Thinking and Partnerships.....	13
Development and implementation of the programme .....	13
Partnerships and collaborations within specific projects .....	14
The benefits of partnership working .....	16
Section 4: Design and Implementation of Projects.....	18
Context-specific and flexible provision .....	18
Holistic and multi-faceted approach .....	19
Supportive environment .....	20
Volunteers.....	21
Planning and development time .....	21
Advertising and recruitment .....	22
Monitoring and evaluation .....	23
Section 5: Reach and Impact.....	24
Reach of the Holiday Hunger Programme.....	24
Impact of the Holiday Hunger Programme .....	25
Comments and feedback about the projects from parents .....	29
Section 6: Recommendations.....	30
Recommendation 1: Encourage systems thinking and partnership working .....	30
Recommendation 2: Allow time to plan and prepare projects .....	31
Recommendation 3: Develop context-specific projects that are tailored to the target audience .....	32
Recommendation 4: Streamline and coordinate evaluation process .....	33
Acknowledgements.....	33

### Executive Summary

School holidays present pressure points for some families due to increased costs of food, childcare and activities. Children in disadvantaged families and those children who are eligible for free school meals are at risk of poorer nutrition, lower physical activity and social isolation during school holidays. To address this issue, the Active Essex Foundation, supported by Active Essex and the Essex Local Delivery Pilot, adopted a whole systems approach to tackle holiday hunger and physical inactivity. The focus was on moving away from a one size fits all approach, towards placing trust in the community consortiums to develop a bottom up approach that worked with what is strong in the community rather than focusing on what was wrong.

As local coordinator, the Active Essex Foundation led a development phase that drew together 56 organisations from across Essex with experience of holiday hunger projects and who were working with the most vulnerable populations to share knowledge and insights, develop partnerships, and design new and innovative approaches. Organisations spanned Community, Health, Community Safety, Social Care, and Education, and worked across private, public and voluntary sectors. Subsequently, proposals were invited from consortiums that adopted a collaborative approach to address holiday hunger and physical activity.

Twenty-three projects were funded, totalling £29,315 of investment (£23,315 from the Essex LDP and £6,000 from Active Essex). The projects leveraged an additional £90,000 of additional funding as well as in-kind contributions, such as of officer time, free use of venues, volunteer time, and free food. The Active Essex Foundation provided ongoing advice and support throughout the development and implementation of the projects.

### The evaluation

The overarching purpose of the programme was to understand how taking a whole system approach influenced how organisations work together to tackle holiday hunger and physical inactivity.

To address this, the evaluation had three specific aims:

1. To understand the partnerships involved in the development and implementation of the Holiday Hunger programmes.
2. To evaluate the processes through which the Holiday Hunger programmes worked and to identify factors that enabled or hindered their work.
3. To evaluate the reach and impact of the Holiday Hunger programmes on families and young children.

A mixed methods approach was adopted to collect data from the participants and providers of the Holiday Hunger projects. This included attendance data, demographics, information on physical activity and wellbeing, and reflections on the projects. Organisations also provided information on the number, type and effectiveness of partnerships involved in the Holiday Hunger projects. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were applied to examine the partnerships between organisations, the processes through which projects worked, and the reach and impact of the programmes.

## Results

### Systems thinking and partnerships

The Active Essex Foundation acted as the local coordinator in this project, they are a countywide organisation working with grassroots organisations supporting target groups of the holiday hunger programme. They played an important role in bringing partners together, reaching county wide partners, local authority groups, food banks as well as providing support to all consortiums in the development and delivery of the holiday hunger projects.

Engaging a diverse range of stakeholders in the development of the overall programme was vital to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in holiday hunger and identify potential solutions from organisations across different sectors working collaboratively. The use of meetings and a systems thinking approach generally served to build capacity, connections and capability in the system. It offered an efficient and integrated approach that should be scaled up in future programmes.

Across the 23 projects, there were 56 different partners involved, all working together in new ways. Nearly 90% of partnerships were rated as extremely or very effective. Partners contributed different expertise, services and support beyond the scope of the lead provider's capabilities or resources, including venues, volunteers, coaching for physical activity sessions, and advice for participants. Partnerships also enhanced promotion and advertising, allowing projects to increase their reach alongside quality of provision.

### The design and implementation of specific Holiday Hunger projects

The majority of projects focused on the provision of meals combined with sports or other enrichment activities (e.g., arts, crafts), targeting those eligible for free school meals. Typically, projects offered nutritional and food education for children, parents and carers. Some projects also provided ingredients to cook meals outside of the project, and two projects focused on the distribution of food hampers and activity packs (e.g., balls, bats) instead of onsite provision. The frequency and duration of sessions varied widely. The total delivery from each project ranged from 10 to 90 hours, with a total of 445 hours of delivery across all projects. There were 3276 total attendances, engaging 840 unique attendees, with 69% of the children attending eligible for free school meals.

In addition to the importance of systems thinking and partnership working, **seven key success factors** impacted the design, development and implementation of the specific Holiday Hunger projects. These success factors should be considered in the design of future projects.

**Context-specific and flexible provision:** It was important that projects were designed to meet the needs of specific target populations, specifically those eligible for free school meals and families living in poverty. Identifying and securing appropriate venues was a key issue - they ideally needed to be accessible, safe, sufficiently large, and with outdoor space. Consideration and where possible removal of potential barriers for participants was important. A flexible approach allowed projects to adjust their plans after meeting participants and developing a better understanding their needs.

## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

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**Holistic and multi-faceted approach:** The projects provided nutritious meals and a range of fun physical activity, which was enjoyed by all and participant feedback highlighted the positive impact this had on them. The projects also provided education and experience for families around sourcing food, preparing food, awareness of nutritious food and enjoying food together round the table as a family. In many cases, families were given food packs to take home so that this ethos of eating nutritious food together was taken back into the family home and so the benefit was felt beyond the delivered sessions.

**Supportive environment:** A supportive environment was a key feature of the projects. It was important that staff made all families feel welcome, particularly for children who had high levels of anxiety about attending.

**Volunteers:** Volunteers often assisted the delivery of their programmes, including cooking, serving, assisting with activities, and collection and delivery. The recruitment, training and coordination of volunteers did take time, but their contribution was highly valued.

**Planning and development time:** Time was important to build partnerships, maximise promotion and advertising, secure appropriate venues, and facilitate the reach and effectiveness of the projects.

**Advertising and recruitment:** Communication with a range of stakeholders (e.g., schools, housing associations, health visitors) was an important strategy to advertise the project and gain referrals, but was sometimes difficult, particularly working with schools to identify those eligible for free school meals. Working with key individuals in the local community increased exposure on social media.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** The projects recognised the importance of monitoring and evaluation, were keen supporters of the process, and valued the evidence and learning it could offer. However, it is important that the evaluation requirements are proportional to the project, focused on the aims of the project, tools are appropriate for the audience, and guidance is shared early.

### Reach and impact of the projects

The projects were generally successful in breaking down barriers and engaging local communities, particularly those eligible for free school meals and most in need of support during the summer holidays. There were over 3,000 attendances in total, with 84% being children (under 16 years old). Across the 23 projects, 840 different individuals attended at least one session, the most common age group was primary school children, and 69% of children were received free school meals.

There was a range of positive impacts on children and parents. Indeed, most of the projects provided multiple benefits to participants, including Physical Wellbeing, Mental Wellbeing, Individual Development, and Social Development. Importantly, the benefits were typically seen in all members of the family who attended. While children were engaged in sport and other activities, parents found time to talk and relax, make new friends and feel part of the local community. Importantly, parents and children ate more healthily. Participants reported feeling less isolated, more connected to their families and wider community, more confident in their ability to be active, and more knowledgeable about healthy eating and nutrition.

## Recommendations

The whole systems approach implemented by the Active Essex Foundation demonstrated great potential to reduce the holiday experience gap and help disadvantaged families at risk of poor nutrition, lower physical activity and social isolation during school holidays. The programme operated in an efficient and joined up manner, reached a large number of families in need, and should be developed and scaled up. Further development, delivery and evaluation of this model across Essex, focusing more closely on Free School Meal hotspots would provide a more robust evidence base that can be used to influence budgets in order to fully sustain this work. The insight and analysis from this evaluation has produced four recommendations to guide future developments of Holiday Hunger programmes in Essex and beyond.

### **Recommendation 1: Encourage systems thinking and partnership working.**

Investment in whole systems thinking and partnership working is required to allow Holiday Hunger and physical activity projects to enhance their reach, service delivery and impact in a sustainable and scalable manner.

### **Recommendation 2: Allow time to plan and prepare projects.**

The effective design and implementation of projects requires time and effort. This allows partners, venues and services to be secured, and for training of staff and volunteers.

### **Recommendation 3: Develop context-specific projects that are tailored to the target audience.**

Projects should consider the context and needs of the target audience. The delivery should be tailored accordingly but generally adopt a holistic and supportive approach.

### **Recommendation 4: Streamline and coordinate evaluation process.**

Evaluation and monitoring is key to determining if projects are successful but also help with learning what does and does not work. Methods and measures need to be focused and appropriate to the projects.

### Section 1: Introduction

#### The Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

Approximately 20% of the UK population struggle to pay the bills and put food on the table. Last year, Chelmsford Foodbank gave out 3,495 emergency food supplies. School holidays are particular pressure points for some families, particularly those who have children eligible for free school meals, because of increased costs, and there is a growing body of evidence of a holiday experience gap with children from disadvantaged families experiencing poor physical, mental and social wellbeing (Gill & Sharma, 2004; Kellogg's Foundation, 2015; The Sutton Trust 2014). Poor nutrition is only one element of the challenge that families face during the school holidays, with children's levels of physical activity decreasing significantly during the school holidays (Beedie et al., 2016).

In Essex, there has been limited use of whole system approaches to tackle societal issues such as holiday hunger. Such approaches are a key focus for the Essex Local Delivery Pilot (LDP), and the Active Essex Foundation identified an opportunity to explore the potential for a whole systems approach to tackle holiday hunger. In the first half of 2019, the Active Essex Foundation set out to work across numerous settings (Community, Health, Community Safety, Social Care, Education) to tackle holiday hunger and physical inactivity, and to be able to influence local and countywide policy and organisations. The focus was on moving away from a one size fits all approach, towards placing trust in community consortiums to develop a bottom up approach that worked with what is strong in the community rather than focusing on what was wrong.

The programme team operated as a local co-ordinator and engaged with organisations across Essex who worked in the most deprived areas of Essex and wanted to develop a holiday hunger programme responding directly to the growing need in their local area. Throughout the development phase, space was created, and conversation generated by the stakeholders involved to understand local communities and to facilitate Asset Based Community Development. Two meetings brought together 56 organisations from across Essex to learn from countywide partners such as The Trussell Trust, the Healthy Cooking Project and West Ham United Foundation to share learning from previous holiday hunger projects. Voluntary groups, local authorities, children's centres, public health, community safety groups, charities, faith groups, CVS's and foodbanks were all involved. Organisations were encouraged to form consortiums and to develop creative and effective approaches and local meetings were encouraged and supported.

The Active Essex Foundation, supported by the Essex LDP and Active Essex, invited proposals from consortiums and subsequently invested in projects that focused on holiday hunger providing nutritious meals and physical activity to those eligible for free school meals, adopted a collaborative approach between partner organisations, and embedded an element of physical activity. In addition to financial investment, the Active Essex Foundation offered ongoing advice and support throughout the development and implementation of the projects. Twenty-three projects were funded, totalling £29,315 of investment (£23,315 from the Essex LDP and £6,000 from Active Essex). A number of projects also leveraged over £90,000 of additional funding and in-kind contributions, such as significant amounts of officer time, free

# Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

use of venues, volunteer time, and free food. The projects are outlined in Table 1.

## The Essex Local Delivery Pilot

Sport England are working with 12 Local Delivery Pilots (LDP) across England to build healthier, more active communities. Around £100 million of National Lottery funding is being invested over four years to create innovative solutions that make it easier for inactive people in these communities to take part in sport and physical activity. The Essex LDP primarily focuses on Basildon, Colchester and Tendring, but some investment will also occur across Essex and the whole county will benefit from the sharing of learning and good practice. Central to the Essex LDP is a whole systems approach, which seeks to make an impact across seven system settings and connect work between individuals and local communities through to high-level policy and decision makers. The Essex LDP Whole Systems Change model is shown in Figure 1.

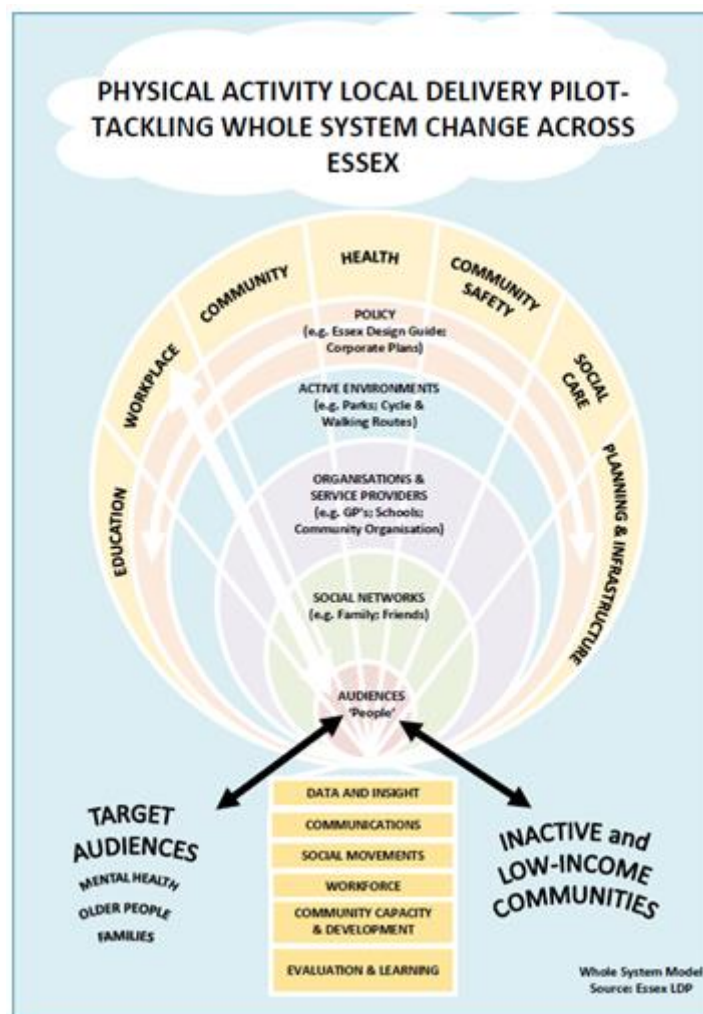


Figure 1. Essex LDP Whole Systems Change Model



## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

**Table 1. The Holiday Hunger Projects: Lead organisation, location and brief description.**

Lead organisation(s)	Local Authority	Outline of Project
Colchester Borough Council	Tendring	This project targeted low-income families living in the Berechurch ward, along with armed forces families in the area. There was an existing food provision, but the LDP funding enabled them to provide physical activity alongside arts and crafts.
First Site	Tendring	First Site already had a successful, established holiday hunger club in Colchester prioritising families who are in receipt of free school meals. They had already secured match funding from Tendring Council and North Essex CCG, but the LDP funding allowed them to offer a range of physical activities alongside free nutritious meals, arts and creative activities.
Coppins Hall Community Association	Tendring	This project targeted young people at risk and local families living in areas of high deprivation. They delivered lunchtime meals and multi-sports sessions in a community centre and in the adjacent multi-use games area.
Essex Child and Family Well being	Colchester	Part of the supermarket fareshare team targeted families in receipt of pupil premium or otherwise struggling from a financial or isolation perspective. They provided families with meal bags that contained all of the ingredients to cook healthy evening meals. They provided transport for the families to reduce travel and access as barriers, and delivered informal physical activity including football, basketball, tennis and other multi-sport activities.
Essex Child and Family Well being	Colchester	As above
Essex Child and Family Well being	Tendring	As above
West Ham United Foundation / Rainbow Services	Harlow	This project targeted families of primary school children, and they gained additional funding from West Ham United and the PCC fund. In addition to multi-sports delivered by West Ham, the families learned about preparing healthy food together and had ingredients to take home with them.
Epping Forest District Council	Epping Forest	This new programme was led by the council in partnership with The Trussel Trust to deliver the Food in School Holidays (FISH) programme. It built on successful programmes from other areas of Epping Forest. It focused on one of the most deprived local estates, worked with Ongar Primary school to target those on free school meals, attempted to engage families and teach them about preparing and eating healthy food.
Barnardos	Maldon	Every year Barnardos and a range of partners provide food hampers to families from local schools who are most in need. The LDP funding enabled them to also provide activity packs alongside the food

## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

		hamper. This included balls, beanbags, cones, rackets etc to encourage families to get more active at home.
Barnardos	Chelmsford	As above
Chelmsford Foodbank	Chelmsford	The funding allowed Chelmsford Foodbank to extend their services and encouraged them to work in partnership with a range of different organisations in order to provide physical activity alongside their summer food offer.
Community 360 and Braintree Foodbank	Braintree	This was an expansion of Braintree Foodbank's FISH programme, which had provided hot meals for many years to families. The new partnership and funding allowed them to also provide physical activity for the first time. They targeted families of KS2 and above who already engaged with the foodbank and got referrals from a range of local organisations. They delivered a 2-course hot meal, multi-sport activities, soft play equipment and a community builder to support the families.
The Deanes Sports Centre	Southend	This project targeted 11-16 year olds living in Benfleet, Hadleigh and Thundersly who receive free school meals. They delivered a fitness-based class, a sports session and a cooking class as well as a free lunch.
Achievement through Football	Southend	This project worked with a group of young people who live within the Saxon Gardens Estate and are at risk of becoming involved in the Criminal Justice System.
Achievement through Football and Queensway Boxing	Southend	This project aimed at engaging young people who live within Queensway and are at risk of county line grooming. It delivered boxing and fitness sessions, sports and BBQ Saturdays.
Brentwood Leisure Trust – Primary school age	Brentwood	This was an extension of an existing fit and fed programme. They worked with West Ham United, the local church and Coach Core apprentices to add additional dates and reach more young people. Greggs provided some food. The Children's Society provided training. They encouraged young people with poor mental health and learning disabilities to get involved.
Brentwood Leisure Trust– Secondary school age	Brentwood	As above, but with older children
Swan Housing	Basildon	This project targeted those living in or near a ward with high deprivation. Football and boxing sessions were delivered in a community centre, along with free nutritious meals, arts and crafts. Working in partnership with West Ham United and Beechwood Boxing, subway provided food.
Motivated Minds	Basildon	This programme was aimed at young people with poor mental health, those with ASD and autism, and those who are LGBTQ. It ran at a local youth club, where in the past they had delivered an intergeneration programme in which young people cooked for the older generation. Young leaders ('Motivators') supported the delivery of the programme.

## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

Motivated Minds	Basildon	As above.
Thurrock Council - Public Health: Thurrock Lunch Club	Thurrock	Thurrock Lunch Club was set up by a community church in Chafford Hundred, which already provided free hot meals to families. They worked in partnership with West Ham in the Community to offer multi-sports sessions twice a week. They also provided education sessions on healthy topics such as healthy eating, oral health, and lifestyle choices / activities.
Thurrock Council - Public Health: Impulse Leisure	Thurrock	Two sessions per week took place at Impulse Leisure, who were looking to replicate a successful holiday hunger programme in their other leisure centres. They provided 60 minutes of fun physical activities followed by a healthy lunch.
Community 360	Braintree	Did not run

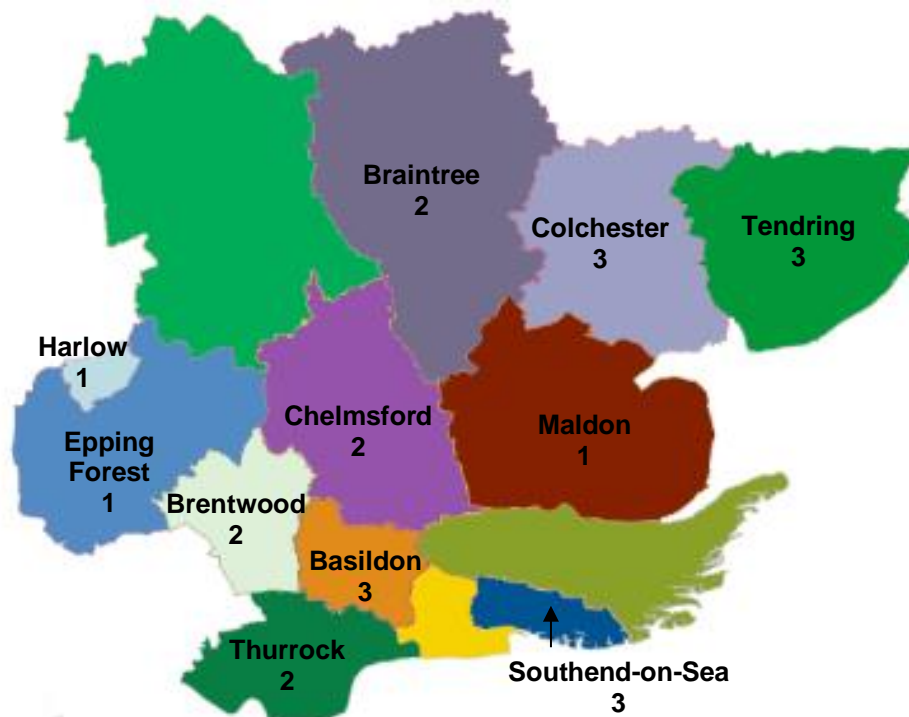


Figure 2. A map of the location of funded projects

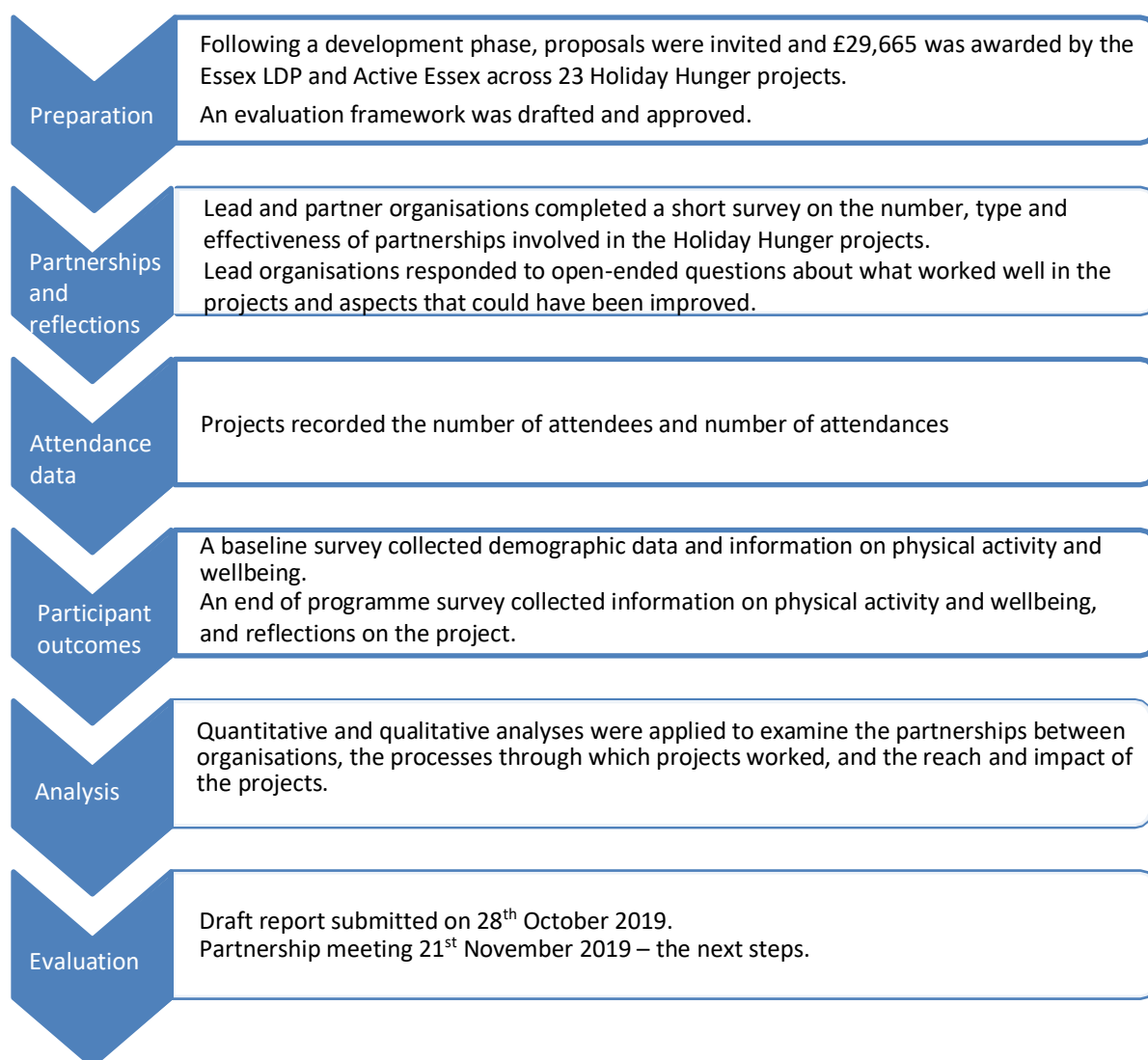
## Section 2: Approach to Evaluation

This report is focused on the evaluation and learning from the Holiday Hunger projects that received investment and support from the Active Essex Foundation. The University of Essex completed this evaluation work.

### Aims of the evaluation

The overarching purpose of the programme was to understand how taking a whole system approach can influence how organisations work together to tackle holiday hunger and physical inactivity. To address this, the evaluation had three specific aims:

1. To understand the partnerships involved in the development and implementation of the Holiday Hunger programmes.
2. To evaluate the processes through which the Holiday Hunger programmes worked and to identify factors that enabled or hindered their work.
3. To evaluate the reach and impact of the Holiday Hunger programmes on families and young children.



**Figure 3. The workflow of the evaluation.**

### Section 3: Systems Thinking and Partnerships

#### Development and implementation of the programme

Adopting a whole system approach and encouraging and supporting collaborative working was a strategic goal for the Essex LDP's support of Holiday Hunger projects. Initially the Active Essex Foundation invested time and resources to identify key organisations and individuals across the system with experience of tackling holiday hunger and working with the most vulnerable groups and families living in poverty in areas of high deprivation. This included consideration of stakeholders in a range of sectors, including Community, Health, Community Safety, Social Care, and Education. The involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders was vital to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in holiday hunger and potential solutions that could be offered by a systems thinking approach. The next key step in the overarching Holiday Hunger programme was a workshop to explore holiday hunger and gain buy-in across the system to tackle the issue in Essex. This event was organised by the Active Essex Foundation, and was attended by representatives of 56 organisations across Essex. Organisations were encouraged to share knowledge and learning via discussions and group tasks, which provided a number of key insights:

- Although targeting young people eligible for free school meals, projects should include the whole family
- Can be hard to get parents along if working with hardest to reach groups but good to have the offer and support there
- Young people at risk (of engaging in anti-social behaviour, or social isolation, being bullied, the bully, SEN, risk of neglect, deprived areas, those on free school meals, known families, wider issues around poverty)
- Link in with schools and community organisations who have prior knowledge of above
- Different need for all areas and will depend on target group and what objectives of the programme
- Need for projects to be flexible enough to meet local needs
- Non institutionalised organisation best to deliver
- Many benefits, health, social, employment, up skilling, education, local authority, community cohesion, and resilience
- Cooking and prepping healthy meals as a family is important
- Mental health support is important
- Important to include cultural activities as well as sport and physical activity
- Opportunity to up –skill and train local people to support / lead the delivery
- Importance of building trust / relationship
- Need to take services to target audiences - not expect them to travel

In addition to the insight gathered, the workshop provided an opportunity for organisations to build partnerships that spanned different parts of the system and to develop novel, innovative and integrated approaches to tackle holiday hunger and physical inactivity. For example, organisations in health contexts formed partnerships with those in education, community and social care. Organisations were also made aware of the support and

## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

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resources available within the Active Essex Foundation and supporting bodies.

The systems thinking approach more generally served to build capacity, connections and capability in the system. Organisations really valued the opportunity to work together and adopt a different way of working; one that they felt was more effective than previously adopted. The whole systems approach offered an efficient and integrated approach that should be scaled up in future. One development in future iterations of the initial meeting could be inclusion of service users to provide an even richer level of community insight and to allow greater levels of co-design of projects.

*“Was a great opportunity for local agencies to work collaboratively and find out more about what each agency/person does. Great networking.” Provider.*

*“The system at present is broken.” Provider.*

*“This year I think we have done things differently.” Provider.*

*“We attended a workshop and made some really good connections and it all started from there really.” Provider.*

*“Getting all the different agencies to come together is what needs to be done.” Provider.*

*“We have linked in with Active Essex and we are working with this pilot on a grander scheme to see what everyone else is doing. You are sort of left in a silo with a lot of youth work and you do what you deem is best and you learn from what you have done in the past. But other people’s input can open loads of other doors so that’s been a really good start process.” Provider.*

## Partnerships and collaborations within specific projects

The meetings not only provided an opportunity for organisations to strengthen existing partnerships, but also build new partnerships. Organisations then met locally to strengthen connections and develop projects that met local needs. Partnerships spanned the private, public and voluntary sectors, and often involved organisations across Education, Health, Community and Social Care. The partnerships made use of the experience of the respective organisations, knowledge gained in the sharing meeting, and combined use of community insight and local assets to design projects that met the needs of the target audience and local context. As part of the evaluation, organisations rated the effectiveness of each partnership involved in their project (1 – extremely effective to 5 – not at all effective) and their level of integration using the definitions provided by Loitz et al. (2017). Nearly 90% of partnerships were rated as very or extremely effective. The work invested by the Active Essex Foundation was an important underpinning factor in ensuring effective partnerships.

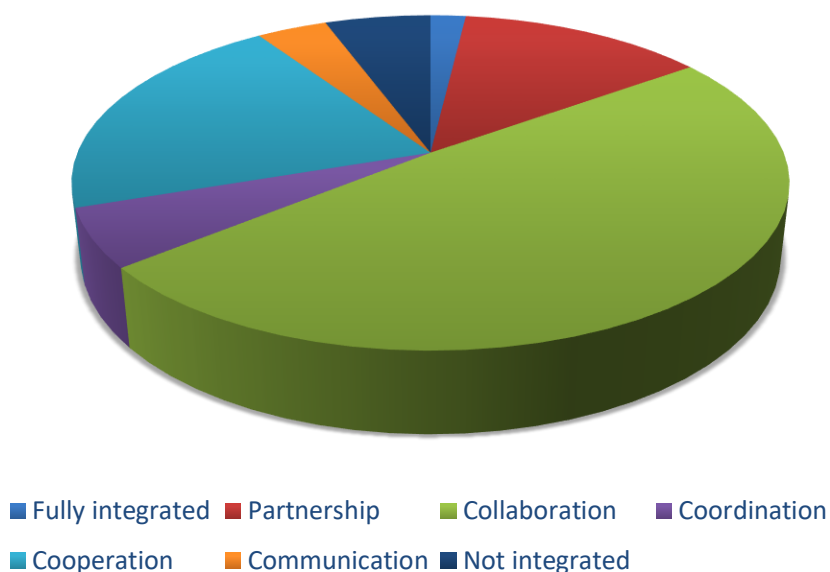
## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

Nearly 50% of partnerships were reported to be collaborations, in which organisations work side-by-side and actively pursued opportunities to work together as an informal team.

56 partner organisations

23 new consortiums

88% of partnerships rated as extremely or very effective



**Figure 4. A breakdown (%) of the type of partnerships involved in the Holiday Hunger Projects (see partnership definitions below).**

### \*Definitions (taken from Loitz et al., 2017)

**Fully integrated** - We mutually plan, share staff or funding resources and evaluate activities to accomplish our goals.

**Partnership** - We work together as a formal team with specified responsibilities to achieve common programme goals (note. responsibility for each organisation is usually outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding or other agreement).

**Collaboration** - We work side-by-side and actively pursue opportunities to work together as an informal team (i.e., do not establish a formal agreement; work together "in the spirit of collaboration").

**Coordination** - We work side-by-side as separate organisations to achieve common programme goals (i.e., efforts are organised to prevent overlap, but tasks are performed as separate organisations).

**Cooperation** - We share information and work together when opportunity arises.

**Communication** - We share information only when it is advantageous to either or both organisations.

**Not integrated** - We do not work together at all and have separate organisational goals.

### The benefits of partnership working

Most organisations reported the importance of partnerships in helping to develop and implement their projects. Partners contributed different expertise, services and support beyond the scope of the lead organisation's capabilities or resources, including venues, volunteers, coaching for physical activity sessions, and advice/signposting for participants. The respective expertise and resources of food agencies (e.g., the Trussell Trust, foodbanks, and supermarkets) and physical activity agencies (e.g., community sports partnerships, football clubs) were particularly crucial to delivery. For example, foodbanks and supermarkets donated food. Sports organisations provided equipment and coaching. Partnerships between schools, housing associations, social care and churches were essential for helping the lead organisations reach populations that they would not have otherwise been able to access. Partners also helped to provide safeguarding advice. It was emphasised, however, that partnerships often take significant time and effort to develop, and that partnerships could be further strengthened to improve the delivery, reach and impact of future Holiday Hunger programmes. Ongoing support to foster networking opportunities and sharing of knowledge will be crucial in this regard. Overall, the ability to bring together 56 different partners as a network of 61 partnerships and 23 unique projects is a real success, and one that should be developed moving forward.

*"Harlow Council has been pleased to help develop and deliver this pilot project and will wish to continue to work with Active Essex and other agencies to develop a sustainable model that can be delivered across Essex in the future." Provider.*

*"Without working in partnership this programme would not have happened at all." Provider.*

*"It has been great to partner with Harwich Homestart who already have a relationship with many families in the area." Provider.*

*"Our Harlow programme has approximately 40 referrals from local refuges, children services and other organisations due to the network that Harlow Council have in place when it came to advertisement." Provider.*

*"My principle is that you work together and form a partnership, whether it be formal or informal, and you can make something happen and change things; and I believe that principle is beginning to work" Provider.*

*"The fact we are able to work in partnership with like-minded people to basically benefit local communities is absolutely fantastic! I think it is testament to the work that Active Essex has put in to bring us all together." Provider.*



## Active Essex Foundation and Holiday Hunger

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*"It's a real mix of different organisations, which is quite nice. Previously when we've done the holiday hunger programmes, it's always been us solely delivering it. And the fact that we're able to share expertise in the local community and reach people that need it the most is the most beneficial thing." Provider.*

*"Thanks for funding from Active Essex Foundation and the support of our local bounty club, which diverts food from landfill, and a local charity. They've been very generous with what they've been able to give us so we've been able to provide the children and some parents with fresh food." Provider.*

*"It has been key working with partners and we have been very grateful that [local churches] have lent us their halls so we can run the pilot this year." Provider.*

### Section 4: Design and Implementation of Projects

Twenty-three projects were funded that targeted the most vulnerable young people and their families across Essex (see Figure 4). Making use of the knowledge, expertise and resources of different partners, the projects adopted a range of designs. Most focused on the provision of meals combined with sport or physical activity sessions and other enrichment activities (e.g., arts and crafts). Many also included nutritional education for children and offered education around meal preparation and cooking for parents and carers. Some projects also provided ingredients to cook meals outside of the project. The frequency and duration of sessions varied widely (e.g., once a week to five times a week, one hour to six hours per session). The total delivery from each project that ran ranged from 10 to 90 hours. In addition to the delivery of sessions and provision of meals, two projects focused on the distribution of food hampers and activity packs (e.g., balls, bats).

**445 hours of activities and meals**

A number of factors emerged for what contributed to, or hindered, the successful design, development and implementation of the Holiday Hunger projects. The benefits of partnership working was identified as vital (see Section 3), but other factors are summarised below along with supporting quotes.

#### Context-specific and flexible provision

Although all projects were aligned with goals to improve health, wellbeing and physical activity, projects were typically designed and developed by lead organisations and partners to meet the needs of specific target population and local context. For example, physical activity ranged from coaching children in sports to informal play in a park. Providers recognised what is effective in one location might not necessarily work elsewhere. Identifying and securing appropriate venues was a key issue, but this was not always easy. Schools, community centres, churches, youth clubs, and sports facilities were all used, and locations/venues ideally needed to be accessible, safe, sufficiently large, and with outdoor space. Projects were conscious of potential barriers faced by the target audience and took steps to remove these where possible (e.g., offering transport). Flexibility was also important, which allowed providers to adjust after meeting participants and better understanding their needs. One project highlighted how they had changed their provision, from targeting only low-income families to be open to all. This enabled them to broaden their focus to include socially isolated families and generally accommodate larger numbers. Similarly, a project struggling to recruit participants redirected their efforts towards delivering sports equipment and fresh food via a foodbank. Some projects did note that in future that they would like to improve the activities they offer to older children (e.g., teenagers). Indeed, it is important that projects offer a diverse range of age-appropriate activities.

*“Transport [provided by ECFWS] has helped us to attend. Would probably not been able to come otherwise. This activity has helped me socialising, less isolation.” Parent.*

*“With the physical activity element, all of our coaches had an initial plan in place for each of the days. However, we then tailored our delivery to incorporate the interests of the participants. This was done to draw engagement throughout and hopefully get returning attendees for following sessions... The flexibility of our provision across the board resulted in a weekly increase in attendances across all of our programmes, which was fantastic to see.” Provider.*

*“If the kids enjoyed a game we didn't stop it to do something else.” Provider.*

*“We divided groups depending on the moods of certain children on the day.” Provider.*

*“Originally we intended that the 'Activity Tuesday' sessions were targeted only to families on a low income however a decision was made at a senior management level that these would be open to all families. This was due to the large numbers we are able to accommodate at the venue where this was held and the fact that our referral process may likely be missing families who are struggling financially. It was also considered that social isolation and low income are not mutually exclusive and there may be many families who could benefit from attending from a social isolation focus.” Provider.*

### **Holistic and multi-faceted approach**

The projects generally adopted an inclusive approach whereby all participants were welcome even if recruitment had primarily targeted children who received free school meals. Physical activity sessions were often run by individuals and organisations with specialist knowledge (e.g., coaches, fitness trainers), and/or high levels of credibility (e.g., football clubs). Development of the workforce and volunteers may be important to build capacity and ensure sustainability. In addition to providing food and physical activity during school holidays, a number of projects included arts and crafts. Some also included other initiatives within their project like the Summer Reading Challenge. Many projects typically educated children and parents on nutrition, cooking and healthy habits that participants could maintain after the projects. This education involved introducing participants to fresh fruits and vegetables or discussing the benefits of different foods. Education may be key to reducing dependency on holiday hunger programmes and ensuring a sustainable approach. A potential barrier, however, was encouraging parents to actually stay and engage with the programme. Building in time and opportunities for parents to talk with one another may be useful. Some projects also sought to signpost families on to other available opportunities and support services.

*"Most parents chose not to stay with their child/children.... Ideally we would have liked parents to stay as we wanted to focus on educating the whole family about healthy diet and lifestyle as well as the benefits of regularly participating in physical exercise." Provider.*

*"Was great to have someone from Family Solutions at all sessions as she was able to engage parents and signpost them to other activities and support services in an informal and friendly (unofficial) way." Provider.*

*"The staff are always welcoming, no matter your background or situation." Parent.*

*"Approximately 100 food parcels were also provided for the days when the project didn't run." Provider.*

*"The food is made on site by our nursery cook. It is all freshly prepared, home cooked meals." Provider.*

### Supportive environment

A supportive environment was a key feature of many projects. Project workers and volunteers offered a range of support, from listening, encouragement, advice and practical assistance. It was important that staff made all families feel welcome. This was particularly important for some children who experienced high levels of anxiety about attending. One project also incorporated a community builder to support families. Quite quickly, the participants themselves sometimes become a support network for each other. It was not just the participants who benefitted from support; the specific projects highlighted the crucial role of support from members of the Essex LDP and Active Essex teams.

*"Many thanks for your assistance over the past 3 weeks - fair to say we couldn't have done it without you guys. I can honestly say that the programme has been one of, if not the most powerful piece that we have delivered over the last 2 years and this is testament to the support you have given us so a massive thank you to you from all of us." Provider.*

*"Upon arrival my son froze in the car and it took quite some time to talk him through a process to get out of the car and near to the building. This was the worst I'd ever seen him. I couldn't have done this by myself and I'm glad that [provider] came over and introduced herself to my son and chatted with him for a while, reassuring and encouraging him. To have someone who knows how he was feeling was a real benefit." Parent.*

*"The social element and a sense of community was the most important part of the project. The sporting activity was secondary." Provider.*

### Volunteers

A number of programmes used volunteers (including young people) to assist the delivery of their programmes. Volunteers helped in various ways including cooking, serving, assisting with activities, and collection and delivery. The recruitment, training and coordination of volunteers did take time, but their contribution was highly valued and seen as a key success ingredient. The volunteers also benefitted from developing skills and experiences that could be listed on their CVs.

*"I have been able to speak to volunteers etc about anything." Parent.*

*"The programme was well received and we are extremely grateful to all the volunteers who enabled it to take place." Provider.*

*"Volunteers working together well, taking the initiative, planning activities, cooking, coming alongside guests." Provider.*

*"The volunteers at the FISH club are a credit to society." Parent.*

### Planning and development time

A number of providers reported that a lack of time between funding procurement and start of their programmes limited their reach and effectiveness. Organisations felt that they could have increased participation if they had time to promote their projects and secure better or bigger venues. Other organisations felt more time would have allowed them to establish more partnerships.

*"We had a one week turn around time to get a proposal in - all of the partners feel we could achieve more and run more sessions with more time for planning." Provider.*

*"With more time we could have established more connections with partners and obtained more in kind support which would have enhanced the programme of activities. In particular, we could have saved costs by establishing a partnership with lunch providers." Provider.*

*"We wanted to run out of a school environment however this wasn't possible as all schools were either fully booked or didn't have the time to arrange staffing to facilitate." Provider.*

*"Funding was delayed, which meant the club struggled with provisions for the first 3 weeks of the holidays." Provider.*

### Advertising and recruitment

A number of projects noted difficulties in recruiting their target audience. Communication with a range of stakeholders (e.g., schools, housing associations, health visitors) was a key strategy to advertise the project and gain referrals but was sometimes difficult. There was a perception that schools felt awkward in promoting Holiday Hunger projects to families most in need due to stigma or fear of embarrassment. Time was seen as crucial to maximise recruitment activities, advertising and promotion. Attendance at some projects was initially low, but grew as they made greater use of social media. Working with key individuals in the local community was one successful strategy to maximise exposure on social media.

*"Once we reached the families and they attended, we found they booked on weekly after that meaning retention was good." Provider.*

*"The biggest challenge remains the same: accessing the most needy and also ensuring the attendance of those booked in advance." Provider.*

*"Despite being busy throughout other holidays we have been much quieter this summer. We need to look at how to better promote this service." Provider.*

*"Some schools do not feel able to approach families who may be in need of a hamper, for fear of causing embarrassment or having to have awkward conversations)." Provider.*

*"Schools having stigma around foodbanks- schemes available throughout summer that the foodbank run and foodbank offering schools a special voucher scheme, but only 1 school out of 10 took the foodbank up on this offer (and this was only 2/10 families at this school)." Provider.*

*"Tried to promote locally but had a low uptake. Participation numbers jumped up significantly when a local mum got involved in the promotion and posted this on social media groups and spoke to local families." Provider.*

### Monitoring and evaluation

The projects recognised the importance of monitoring and evaluation, were keen supporters of the process, and valued the evidence and learning it could offer. However, a number of projects stressed that it is important the evaluation requirements are proportional to the project, focused on the aims of the project, tools are appropriate for the audience, and guidance is shared early. Where some participants struggled with elements of the questionnaires, some projects provided staff to support the process, but this can be a time-consuming and costly process.

*“Very in-depth and lots of writing which can put people off completing.”  
Provider.*

*“Evaluation details were shared quite late and when we were already very busy with delivering the project.”  
Provider.*

*“A large proportion of our clients struggle with reading/writing so staff support was needed which was not always possible due to staffing levels.”  
Provider.*

*“Monitoring requirements need to mirror the target audience and capabilities.”  
Provider.*

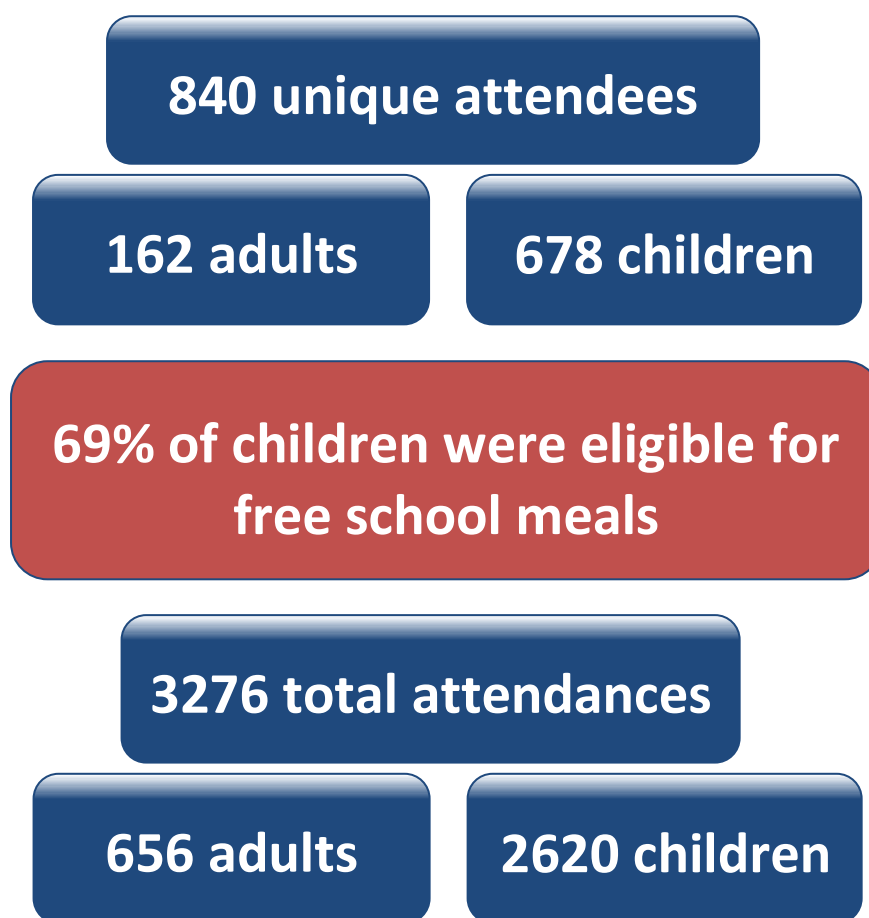
## Section 5: Reach and Impact

### Reach of the Holiday Hunger Programme

The projects were generally successful in breaking down barriers and engaging local communities, particularly those most in need of support during the summer holidays and those children eligible for free school meals. There were over 3,000 attendances in total, with 84% being children (under 16 years old). Not every project reported further breakdowns on the specific age range of children, eligibility free school meals or unique attendees. However, for those that did there were 840 different individuals who attended at least one session, the most common age group was primary school children (see Figure 5), and 69% of children were received free school meals. Participation within a project ranged from zero attendances (projects that did not run and/or struggled to recruit participants) to 600+ attendances. Potential reasons for this variation include:

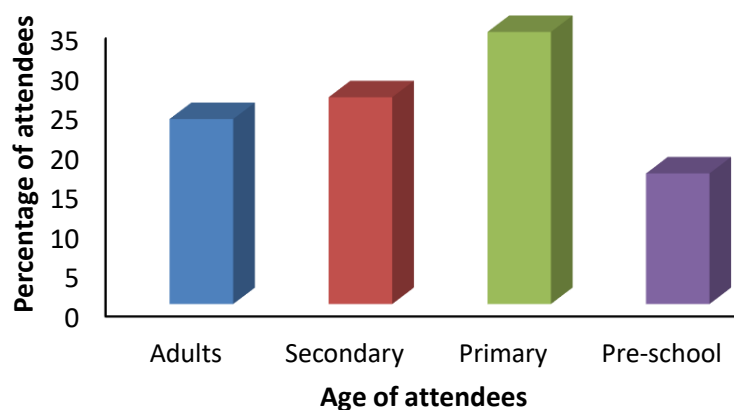
**Size of target population:** Some projects focused on one population (e.g., residents of one specific estate) while other projects targeted wider areas in their localities.

**Effectiveness:** Some projects felt they reached their target population successfully whereas others struggled to recruit participants for some or all of the weeks when they ran their program.





*“Number of hampers being provided have increased, supporting more families over school holidays who are at risk of Holiday Hunger.” Provider.*



**Figure 5. Percentages of attendees by school age.**

### Impact of the Holiday Hunger Programme

Across the Holiday Hunger projects, there was a range of positive impacts on children and parents. Indeed, most of the projects provided multiple benefits to participants, including Physical Wellbeing, Mental Wellbeing, Individual Development, and Social Development. Importantly, the benefits were typically seen in all members of the family who attended. While children were engaged in sport and other activities, parents found time to talk and relax. Importantly, parents and children ate more healthily. Participants reported feeling less isolated, more connected to their families and wider community, more confident in their ability to be active, and more knowledgeable about healthy eating and nutrition. However, response rates to a questionnaire provided to adult participants was very low. Free text comment sections provided more usable data compared to numeric response scales. In addition to evidence collected by the University of Essex, some projects collected their own data and feedback, and this evidence was integrated into the current report.

#### Physical wellbeing

The projects typically offered a range of sport and physical activities. Physical activities varied across the projects, but included football, tennis, volleyball, dodgeball, boxing, basketball, multi-sports, and fitness classes. By taking part, children often met the Chief Medical Officer’s guidance for daily physical activity levels. Some parents and children noted that they would not have been physically active without attending the projects. Children valued the opportunity to try different activities and new sports in a fun and supportive environment. Importantly, children often reported high levels of enjoyment, which may be a crucial factor in facilitating re-attendance and more generally physical activity in the future. Some providers reported receiving feedback from parents that their children were more active and had lost some weight.

*"It's really fun. I want to come here more often. I was playing tennis but I got too hot." Child.*

*"So many great services provided. The outside sports events are loved by my son. Fantastic opportunities for socialisation and education." Parent.*

*"It's a great help normally we would be doing nothing but with this we have something fun to do." Child.*

*"Games out in the back yard is great fun for the kids to play with different things and different children." Parent.*

*"The level of physical activity have improved and children and their families have been provided with a hot lunch, during the school holidays." Parent.*

*"I like the sports, things you have done have all been great!" Parent.*

### Mental wellbeing

Participants highlighted a range of beneficial effects upon mental wellbeing, including increased self-esteem, happiness and enjoyment, and reduced stress and anxiety. Many of the projects incorporated elements associated with each of the five ways to wellbeing. Physical activity was integral to most projects, and the range of activities (including sport, art and crafts) appeared to be a key factor in enhancing the mental wellbeing of children. The social aspect and opportunity to connect with others appeared particularly important in enhancing the mental wellbeing of parents, but also in many of the children. Participating in new activities provided valuable opportunities to develop new knowledge and skills. Children reported feelings of awareness in their response to physical activity (e.g., getting hot, becoming sweaty), and these were typically viewed in a positive light. While not all participants volunteered time, the inclusion of volunteers was a key success factor in many projects. Nearly all participants gave a thank you or other positive sentiment about the projects and staff involved.

*"My son now plays with other people and is not nervous anymore. The project has been great." Parent.*

*"This activity has really benefitted my family. It kept my children busy in a fun and fulfilling way. We did not need to go on holiday." Parent.*

*"A massive difference to me personally as I was able to talk to the ladies who was so helpful to me and my situation and just having someone to talk to helps so much. Also not worrying about having to feed my family for the day. I love the fact that the children get to explore different activities with different people and children." Parent.*

### Individual development

Development occurred in a variety of aspects, including increased confidence, knowledge and learning of new skills. Children and their parents valued the opportunity to try new activities and sports, and this developed their confidence and perceived capability to be more active. Improvement in confidence was not restricted to belief in one's ability to be physically active, but in the knowledge of healthy eating and cooking skills. The educational component in many projects helped in this regard and could offer a longer-term impact than the provision of food alone. That is, some parents and children noted that they had more knowledge of health and nutrition and had developed their ability to cook nutritious meals. Further, the projects provided opportunities for participants to meet new people, and enabled children and parents to develop social skills and confidence in meeting new people. Some parents and children also developed a stronger sense of resilience, emotional control, and problem-solving ability. For some families it was the first time that they had all sat around a table together to enjoy a home cooked meal.

*"The skills that they learnt through sport, you know team work, your communication, your confidence, your self-esteem, as well as you know along with your practical skills." Provider.*

*"I would recommend your fit n fab programme to any of my friends without hesitation and I genuinely hope we can engage with you all again as I think you would help my son's confidence and self-esteem massively- and the beauty is – I don't even think any of you realise just how good you are!! A million thank you's." Parent.*

*"I am a 30 year old mum of two, myself and my children have been living in a women's refuge since April. Living in a refuge has been difficult for us all, my children's lives have been tipped upside down but they have just taken it in their stride and don't make too much fuss. I have watched my son's confidence and happiness drop and I have been unable to help much. I was blessed and truly grateful to receive tickets for my son to take part in the Healthy Hammers summer camp this year. With thanks to the great team that were there doing activities with the children, I have slowly but surely watched my son rebuild his confidence in perfect timing before the start of school term again, my son has really come out of himself now and he is now much more happier than I have seen him in a long time, it's nice to see him smile a real smile again. I appreciate all of this and grateful to all those that has made it possible for my boy to find himself again." Parent.*

### Social development

Great care was placed in creating an environment that would foster the development of strong and positive relationships between the providers and participants, and between the participants themselves. Parents valued the opportunity to speak to one another, and the friendships created through the projects. Children also formed friendships, and social interactions were reported as contributing to better mental wellbeing. The physical activity (and arts and crafts) provided a shared sense of purpose and encouraged the development of team work and social skills. As such, social isolation was reduced in many adults and children. It was not just the opportunity to meet new friends, however, but also the time to connect with and spend time with family, such as preparing and eating a meal together. A necessary condition to foster communication within families, however, was to ensure that parents took part in the project and were involved alongside their children in some of the activities. Further, some parents also noted they had more awareness of activities in the local community, and were more willing to leave their houses and engage with other services and opportunities in future.

*"It has provided an interesting and varied activity for the children, while providing a chance for down time for me and a chance to socialise with friends." Parent.*

*"Families were able to eat a meal together and share this time as a family." Provider.*

*"My children have made some new friends." Parent.*

*"They break down barriers because the truth is there is no way that they would have communicated outside of these four walls. So for you know people of different generations to be able to communicate and build up rapport and relationships is absolutely lovely to see." Provider.*

*"There was litter everywhere and a lot of young people, off their own back without me telling them or asking or encouraging them went and started litter picking and cleared up the area and started to take pride in the area they lived in." Provider.*

## Comments and feedback about the projects from parents

Beyond the themes identified above, many parents took time to write feedback about the projects. Examples of this are provided below.

*"Lovely friendly volunteers!"*

*"It's brilliant!"*

*"Helpful getting transport."*

*"Kids loved coming."*

*"Gives us a little routine, somewhere to go!"*

*"Friendly staff!"*

*"Kids got to mix with others and enjoy the food."*

*"It gets us out of the house, the kids love the activities provided, and the food is always lovely."*

*"If it wasn't for this project there would have been times we would have had no food. I am so grateful this project is here."*

*"It has helped us a lot as I'm a single mum."*

*"Can't wait till it's on again in the next half term."*

*"The lady that runs it does a fantastic job!"*

*"A safe place for children of all ages at no expensive outlay. It's important for places like this to be available in all areas."*

*"This club has helped to feed my children on the days I may have not been able to do so."*

*"[Provider] is amazing!"*

*"It is fun for kids and meeting new people."*

*"The ability to take my children somewhere fun, safe and free."*

*"There is not anything you could have done better!"*

*"I've been able to talk to people (I suffer from anxiety)."*

*"It would be great if you could stay open all day and not just for breakfast."*

*"Open more often and with better advertising as only found out about it in the final week."*

*The menu bags have been a big help!"*

*"Children can have safe play and I can mix with other parents!"*

### Section 6: Recommendations

The whole systems approach adopted by the Active Essex Foundation to tackle holiday hunger demonstrated great potential. It built on the success of previously established relationships between organisation and led to the development of 26 new partnerships. The resulting projects reached a large number of families in need to support during the summer holidays. It is vital to develop the sustainability of this approach as it promises much in terms of effective and efficient practice. Continued work with partners across Essex will maximise the benefits of systems working, could help improve budget allocations and ensure sustainability at local and county level. However, whole system approaches are complex and take time to develop and scale up to target new locations and reach even more families. The insight and analysis from this evaluation has produced four recommendations that should be implemented to further improve the development, implementation and impact of Holiday Hunger programmes in Essex and beyond.

#### Recommendation 1: Encourage systems thinking and partnership working

**Investment in whole systems thinking and partnership working is required to allow Holiday Hunger and physical activity projects to enhance their reach, service delivery and impact in a sustainable and scalable manner. To do this we recommend investing in:**

##### 1. Understanding the interconnections between organisations

- Map the organisations within the system and their current and possible future links to tackle complex societal issues.

##### 2. Gain insight and buy-in from across the system

- Make use of the knowledge and insights provided by organisations with experience of tackling holiday hunger and working with hard to reach populations.
- Actively engage organisations via meetings and workshops to ensure buy-in for collaborative working and adopting a systems approach.

##### 3. Strengthening collaboration and partnerships

- Enhance partnerships across the system to ensure collaboration and common strategic goals.
- Create joint funding streams to recognise the multiple benefits that successful projects can accrue.
- Hold pre-funding call workshops to allow time for organisations to network, share knowledge and develop innovative approaches.

## Recommendation 2: Allow time to plan and prepare projects

**The effective design and implementation of projects requires time and effort. This allows partners, venues and services to be secured, and for training staff and volunteers. In future programmes, we recommend:**

### 1. Funders release calls and award announcements early

- Plan schedule of workshops, funding calls, and award announcements to allow organisations time to develop networks and ideas.
- Release funding in a timely manner to projects to secure facilities, resources and provisions, and to pay for services.

### 2. Organisations allocate time to design and develop projects

- Allow time to explore the needs of the target population and use co-production to design the project.
- Allocate time and resources to secure facilities, resources and provisions.

### 3. Projects allocate time and funds for advertising and recruitment

- Identify key stakeholders to aid recruitment of target communication early in the planning process.
- Consider barriers to recruitment and identify possible solutions.

### 4. Projects allocate time to build capacity and train the workforce

- Invest time in training youth workers, volunteers, and staff who already engage with the target population and who run summer programmes to be able to deliver informal sport and physical activity sessions.
- Provide ongoing support to volunteers to enable them to effectively contribute to the delivery and development of the project.

## Recommendation 3: Develop context-specific projects that are tailored to the target audience

**The design of should consider the context and needs of the target audience. The delivery should be tailored accordingly but generally adopt a holistic and supportive approach. To achieve this, we recommend:**

### 1. Utilising community insight

- The design of projects should draw on community insight, local assets, and the knowledge of organisations who work in the local area and with the target population.
- One key to success is flexibility for local projects to respond directly to local needs.
- Concentrate projects in the areas with highest percentage of children on free school meals.

### 2. Identifying appropriate locations

- Locations and venues ideally need to be accessible, safe, sufficiently large, and with outdoor space (e.g., school premises).

### 3. Adopting a holistic and multi-faceted approach

- Projects should consider how they might impact upon participants' physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development and social development.
- Projects should consider the needs of parents and children, including different requirements across age groups.
- A range of enrichment activities should be offered that include physical activity, social interaction, and other activities (e.g., arts, crafts).
- Education around healthy eating and lifestyles should be included alongside the provision of free meals.
- Include the young people and families in the preparation of nutritious meals.
- Hampers and meal bags are important resources on days that projects are not running and to help families who cannot attend.
- Alongside paid staff, volunteers can play a crucial role in the delivery of a multi-faceted, high quality project.



### Recommendation 4: Streamline and coordinate evaluation process

**Evaluation and monitoring is key to determining if projects are successful but also help with learning what does and does not work. Methods and measures need to be focused and appropriate to the projects. To improve this process, we recommend:**

#### 1. A standard evaluation framework

- A consistent approach to evaluation should be used across Essex. This should consider tools, methods, and process and outcome evaluation.
- Establish minimum reporting standards and supporting guidance for the consortiums across Essex.

#### 2. Accessible and appropriate monitoring evaluation tools

- Data collection needs to be simple, cost-effective, not over burdensome for participant or deliverer, and at the right time points.
- Both quantitative and qualitative tools should be employed.
- Methods and tools should be accessible to children and adults. Different versions should be created for both age groups.

#### 3. Involve projects in the design and implementation of the evaluation process

- Deliver training workshops and toolkits on different methods and tools for measurement, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Use workshops as an opportunity to co-design or test and refine methods and tools.
- Provide clear and early guidance to projects outlining the evaluation framework.

#### 4. Monitor and evaluate the long-term impact

- The longer-term legacy of the programme on developing and maintaining partnerships between organisations should be evaluated.
- The impact on participants' physical and mental wellbeing, individual development and social development should be monitored beyond the end of the programme (e.g., three-month follow-up).

## Acknowledgements

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