Education Select Committee consultation on ‘Every Child Achieving and Thriving’ White Paper Submission from Feeding Britain (July 2026)

About Feeding Britain

Feeding Britain is an award-winning charity with a vision of a UK where no one goes hungry. We support a national network of 150 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships comprising more than 700 frontline organisations – ranging from community centres and schools, to local authorities and social enterprises.

By piloting innovative and effective new projects, and showing how severe or chronic food insecurity can be prevented, we are designing a road map for eliminating hunger from the communities we serve. By sharing this knowledge with others, and using it to work for systemic changes at a national level, we will ensure hunger becomes a thing of the past.

Consultation response

Feeding Britain is concerned regarding the Department for Education’s proposed reforms to disadvantage funding, in particular the implications of breaking the link between eligibility for free school meals (FSM) and the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme. HAF provides nutritious meals, enriching activities, and free childcare places during school holidays for children from families on low incomes, who qualify for means-tested FSM during termtime. However, from September 2026, 500,000 children and young people becoming newly eligible for FSM will be disqualified from HAF during the school holidays.

As noted in the White Paper, FSM eligibility is being expanded to all families in receipt of Universal Credit from September 2026. While we very much welcome this, the Government is also taking the decision to break the link between eligibility for FSM and eligibility for the HAF programme. We believe that this decision is unjust and risks undoing the gains which should accrue, for children and young people’s development, from receiving termtime FSM.

Feeding Britain has been fortunate to resource the creation of tens of thousands of additional places at HAF clubs, specifically for children and young people living in poverty who do not meet the eligibility criteria, but our work as a charity can only go so far. We believe the Department for Education should reverse its decision, and ensure that all children in receipt of means-tested FSM are eligible to register and access the HAF programme.

We have interviewed people across our network who administer or attend HAF clubs in the Feeding Britain network.

Our respondents highlighted the following points in particular:

Nutrition

For parents who are struggling to put food on the table, HAF guarantees at least one nutritious meal each day for their children, and reduces stress for parents and carers as their children are in a safe environment, engaged in enriching activities and receiving a hot meal with healthy snacks:

"Some children, upon arrival, are absolutely starving." (HAF club, Merseyside)

"It has made a real difference to her, knowing that we [the HAF club] are able to feed her children as she is struggling and knowing they are getting a hot meal relieves her anxiety." (HAF club, London)

"If you add up the cost of feeding your children for the entire six-week holiday, that's going to be more than some people's wages. HAF helps massively with this. Some mums don't feed themselves." (HAF club, Merseyside)

Wellbeing

The enrichment activities delivered in HAF clubs hugely benefit children's health and wellbeing, and foster community cohesion for all the families who attend:

"I love coming here. My children love coming here. My children have got their own, what they call, 'holiday club friends' and they know everyone, and they will go and play, and as I say it's also a chance for a lot of children who are playing right now running around outside, they're exercising without knowing it, they're laughing, they're having fun – they otherwise might just be sitting indoors on video games, not getting any sunshine, not getting any social interaction. There is not one single phone there – all they do is talk and play and run around and laugh and have fun. There are no electronic devices, which is a rarity now. There are kids coming here who we didn't know, who we've gotten to know, all the kids get on, all the adults get on – it's a really lovely community environment." (HAF club, Merseyside)

Specialist support

HAF also helps families in difficult circumstances that require specialist support:

"We support a child from a service family. They have additional social and emotional development needs and are currently on an autism diagnosis pathway. A parent is regularly deployed, which can be distressing for the child and contributes to anxiety around their safety and wellbeing. The other parent has also recently experienced a period of ill health requiring hospitalisation. With appropriate supervision, the child is able to engage in group activities, and access to structured provision would support their social development and overall wellbeing." (HAF club, Hampshire)

Income thresholds

There are already too many families in receipt of Universal Credit who earn a household income that places their children above the threshold to access a place at a HAF club, even though their children will qualify for FSM from September 2026. This threshold fails to factor

in that most of their income goes on food, rent, energy and other essentials. They have no disposable income left to pay for holiday activities, but cannot avail of the HAF programme as they are deemed ineligible:

"We had one lady who was over the threshold by 60p. What are you going to buy with 60p? You can't even get a loaf. It is so common - for every child that we support, there's another three that [just] miss out." (HAF club, Merseyside)

"One family we will be supporting has three children, with both parents working full-time. On paper, their combined income places them above the [current, pre-September 2026] threshold for free school meals. However, in reality, once rent, bills and everyday living costs are covered, they have very little disposable income. The cost of sending three children to a holiday camp from 8am - 6pm is simply unaffordable. With this funded place, it will relieve a huge amount of pressure. Their children are able to attend, enjoy activities, and spend time with friends, while the parents are able to continue working without worrying about childcare or packed lunches as all the costs add up." (HAF club, London)

Lack of access for working parents

HAF clubs report the sense of injustice that comes from poorer working families being deemed ineligible for HAF support; this will be exacerbated by breaking the link between FSM and HAF eligibility:

"[The children who are eligible] have got friends who can't come. Their friends live on the same street, their mum might earn an extra £15 a week, and that's not going to equate to really good high quality food every day. It's singling the kids out. Just because your parents work, you're not entitled to this bit of fun that we've got to give you […] There shouldn't be haves and have-nots; it should be a universal offer so all children are fed, safe and happy." (HAF club, Merseyside)

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From its inception, the HAF programme was targeted at families in receipt of FSM, recognising the acute hardship experienced by these families in the absence of means-tested FSM during school holidays. Breaking the link between FSM and HAF eligibility would have a devastating impact on the very people HAF is supposed to support. A respondent from one of our HAF clubs in Northumberland expressed this best:

"I was dismayed to hear that parents whose children will get FSM by being on Universal Credit will not be eligible for HAF. We already have difficulties in explaining the difference between UIFSM and means-tested FSM and from September we will have some means-tested FSM who can come to our HAF club and other means-tested FSM who can't! What are we meant to say to these parents? They are in receipt of Universal Credit, and their children will get FSM in school from September. They will rock up at our HAF club expecting to be able to register as schools have pushed the link between FSM and HAF for years, this is how we recruit to our HAF club. This is so confusing for parents and the HAF club or council is going to have to check the eligibility of all children, even those who have attended in the past. This will take time and therefore cost money, when we should be

focusing on ensuring as many children as possible can attend HAF. Really, it's the tail wagging the dog." (HAF club, Northumberland)

The White Paper must make provision to maintain the link between FSM and HAF eligibility, from April 2027, with the necessary funding to create the additional capacity that is required within the programme to support this larger group of children and young people.