

Shout Out for SEND: What we said about Short Breaks and Respite

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Buckinghamshire
Council



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Introduction

In our May 2026 Shout Out for SEND meeting, we explored short breaks by sharing our real experiences of different activities and support available to us. Using movement-based activities, discussion, and design tasks, we worked together to understand what short breaks are, who they work for, and where they don't always work well.

We focused on three key things: what works well, what can make short breaks difficult or hard to access, and what better short breaks could look like when designed with young people.

This report is here to help people think about what's working and what needs to improve. It isn't about judging services or staff. Everything shared comes directly from young people and shows what makes the biggest difference, as well as where things don't always match up in real life.

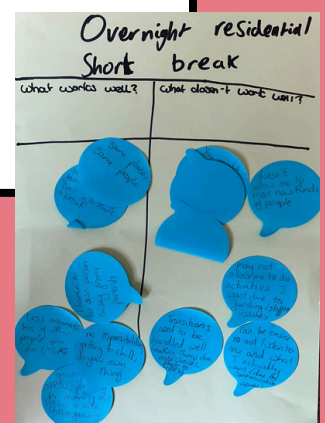
During the session, young people also designed their own short break ideas, thinking about what is missing and what needs to change. At the end of this report, we've included these ideas, feedback from professionals, and what happens next as we continue working together.

Overnight Residential Short Breaks

Overnight residential short breaks were discussed as offering important space, independence, and consistency, but also highlighted challenges around change, communication, and choice.

What works well

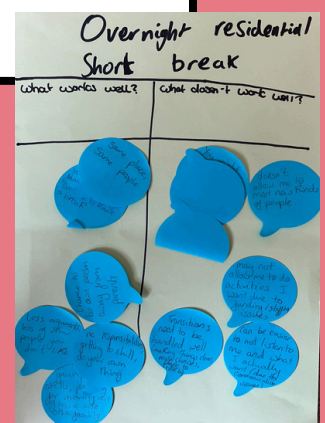
- you can have your own room
- same place same people keeping things consistent
- time away from parents families or siblings for everyone to have their break
- can give other siblings more quality time with their family
- chance to be their own person away from their parents or carers
- meeting people your own age and like you
- less arguments less of other people you don't like
- no responsibilities getting to chill and doing your own thing
- gaining new skills, preparing for moving out of home into other facilities



Overnight Residential Short Breaks

What doesn't work well

- you might not know people
- doesn't allow me to meet new kinds of people
- different rules and change
- can be confusing or scary if not explained well
- may not allow me to do activities I want to due to funding or staffing issues
- transitions need to be handled well – making things clear, map, choices, people to talk to
- can be easier to not listen to me and what I actually want due to communication issues



Youth Club – Encouraging Transitions to Adulthood

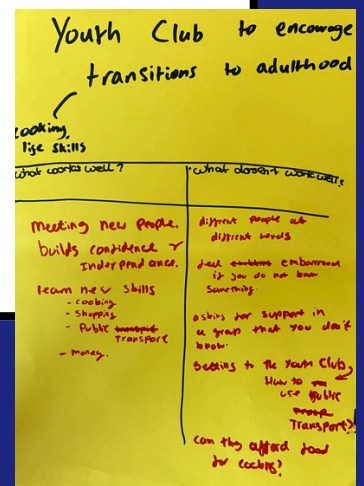
Youth clubs were discussed as helping with independence and confidence, while also highlighting challenges around different abilities, group settings, and asking for support.

What works well

- meeting new people
- it builds confidence and independence
- learn new skills like cooking, shopping, money and public transport

What doesn't work well

- different people at different levels
- feel embarrassed if you do not know something
- asking for support in a group that you don't know yet
- setting for the youth club; how to use public transport
- will they have funding for food and cooking



Scouts (with no additional support)

Scouts were discussed as offering opportunities to try new things and build skills, but also highlighted challenges around busy environments, inclusivity, and varying levels of support.

What works well

- SEND experienced volunteers
- group learning to know sign making for the SEND person to make it more inclusive
- varied activities available
- no pressure to be good at something or to be the best
- online groups
- the ability to have parents help if you need it
- learning new skills
- getting to interact with a wide range of children and young people

Scouts with no support	
What works well?	What doesn't work well?
See experienced volunteers Group learning leads to sign making, sign person inclusive Varied activities available No pressure to be good at something or the best Online groups Ability to have parent help Learning new skills to a wide range of groups When there are more people, it's better	Can be too noisy during Can't always finish the tasks Some activities aren't inclusive, accessible, more sign activities Understanding experience of volunteers Many not in school/university groups, not signed Under activities (e.g. running, etc.) not part of group, not signed, not accessible After school, after school, because of pressure, no understanding

Scouts (with no additional support)

What doesn't work well

- it can be too noisy and busy
- you can't always finish the tasks
- some activities aren't inclusive, for example access ability for those using wheelchairs
- SEND understanding and experience of the volunteers can vary
- may not fit into typical age and group categories
- wider activities for example camps and hikes are not very accessible for people with SEND
- often treated differently or excluded because of ignorance with no understanding

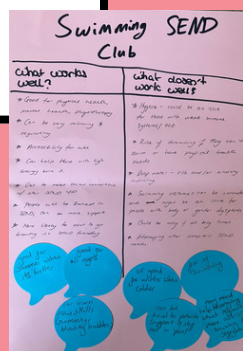
Scouts with no support	
What works well?	What doesn't work well?
Self-experienced volunteers Group learning leads to sign and making sense person inclusion Varied activities available No pressure to be good at something or the best One group Ability to have parent help Learning new skills to be left with task range of tasks When there's more you can do	Can be too noisy and busy Can't always finish the tasks Some activities aren't inclusive, accessibility, more very difficult Understanding experience of volunteers may not fit into typical age group categories Wider activities (e.g. camps/hikes) not part of group often treated differently/excluded because of ignorance/no understanding

Swimming SEND Club

Swimming SEND clubs were discussed as providing benefits for physical and mental health, while also highlighting sensory, safety, and accessibility challenges.

What works well

- good for physical health mental health and physiotherapy
- can be very calming and regulating
- accessibility for all
- can help those with high energy burn it off
- get to make social connections with other SEND young people
- people will be trained in SEND so they can support more
- more likely to want to go knowing it is SEND friendly
- it's good for summer when it's hotter
- good for all ages
- can learn new skills for example building swimming skills and blowing bubbles



Swimming SEND Club

What doesn't work well

- hygiene could be an issue for those with weak immune systems or OCD
- risk of drowning if they can't swim or have physical health needs
- deep water – risk and/or anxiety inducing
- swimming costumes can be uncomfortable and might be an issue for people with body or gender dysmorphia
- could be noisy if at busy times
- managing other people's SEND needs
- not good for winter when it's colder
- fear of swimming
- can be hard to provide support if staff are not in the pool
- may need help changing which requires more intensive training and safeguarding procedures

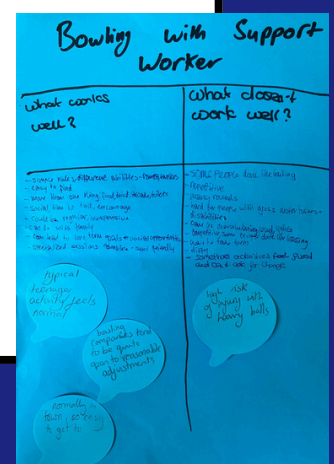
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Bowling (with a support worker)

Bowling was discussed as a familiar and accessible activity with simple rules, while also highlighting challenges around noise, waiting, and flexibility.

What works well

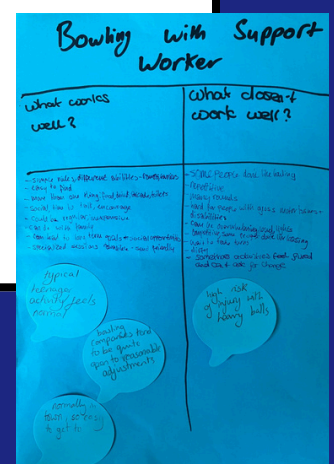
- simple rules, different abilities including ramps and barriers
- easy to find, more than one thing: food, drink, arcade, toilets
- social time to talk and encourage
- could be regular and inexpensive
- can do it with the family too
- can lead to long term goals and social opportunities
- specialised sessions available which could be SEND friendly
- typical teenager activity feels normal
- bowling companies tend to be quite open to reasonable adjustments
- it's normally in town so easy to get to



Bowling (with a support worker)

What doesn't work well

- some people don't like bowling
- repetitive, many rounds
- hard for people with gross motor difficulties and disabilities
- can be overwhelming, it's loud and has lots of lights
- competitive, some people don't like losing
- waiting to take turns can be tricky
- could be dirty
- some activities feel fixed and can't ask for change that much
- high risk of injury with heavy balls



Our Short Breaks Ideas: Going to a Dog Rescue



Who it's for

- someone with an EHCP, 18 to 25 years old, neurodivergent
- (could work for many ages/abilities)



What happens

- animal-based and interactive
- walk, play with, train, cuddle, wash and groom dogs
- help with puppy socialisation



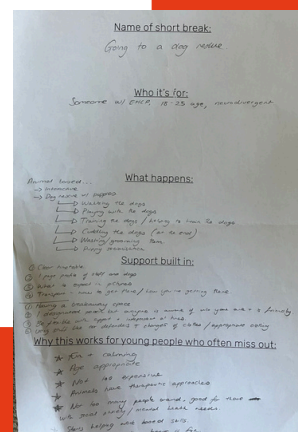
Support built in

- clear timetable
- one page profile of staff and dogs
- what to expect in pictures
- transport planned (how to get there and back)
- breakaway space if needed
- one designated person, but everyone knows you
- flexible support and independence
- things like defenders, changes of clothes



Why this works for young people who often miss out

- it's fun and calming
- not too many people around
- good for social anxiety and mental health needs
- animals have therapeutic approaches
- it's age appropriate and not too expensive
- helps build work-based skills



Our Short Breaks Ideas:

Volunteering



Who it's for

- 14 to 16 and above
- SEND needs can vary by activity



What happens

- the individual identifies a volunteering opportunity they would enjoy
- maybe linked to a possible career they want
- examples: charity shops, sport clubs, SEN clubs, Waddesdon Manor, National Trust properties, agriculture and gardening



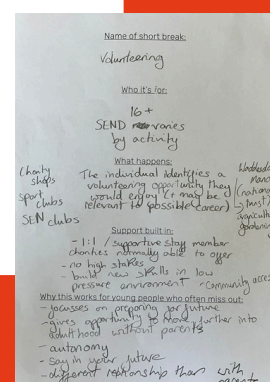
Support built in

- one to one or a supportive staff member
- charities normally able to offer support
- no high stakes or pressure
- builds new skills in a low pressure environment
- community access



Why this works for young people who often miss out

- focuses on preparing for adulthood in the future
- gives opportunities to move further into adulthood without parents or carers
- autonomy
- you have a say in your future
- different relationship than with parents and carers



Our Short Breaks Ideas:

Outdoor SEND Group (with SEND professional)

Who it's for

- 12 to 16 year olds
- those who struggle to leave the house
- find it tricky to go because they've not been supported in other places

What happens

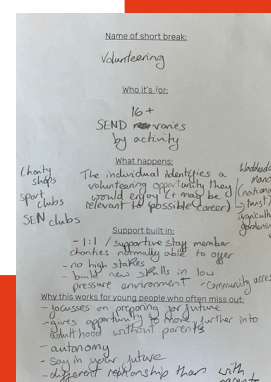
- experienced SEND professionals help
- first it's about building relationships
- second it's about getting involved safely doing easy things with a touch of adventure
- third is stretch and challenge doing more exciting, challenging things
- includes things like movies, food, barbecues / campfires

Support built in

- no pressure
- SEND professionals who know what to do
- maybe one adult to five young people
- flexibility

★ Why this works for young people who often miss out

- people have a hard time building relationships and getting out there
- can't go to scouts but want something like this
- this would be much better for them
- it's a big part of preparing to be an adult



Our Short Breaks Ideas: Confidence & Life Skills

Originally named 'Digger Land' by the group



Who it's for

- someone with SEMH needs
- maybe missing out on learning and is NEET
- quite isolated
- 16 to 18 years old



What happens

- pastoral support
- one to one maybe trying to find out goals to improve life outcomes
- confidence boosting
- local buildings
- cinema trips
- Comic Con and big interesting events
- drama and improv



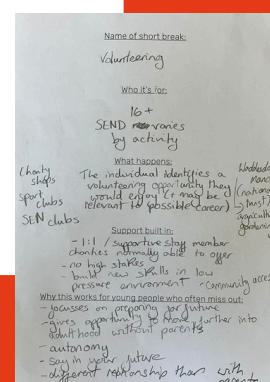
Support built in

- one to one support
- aware of our needs
- pre meets with a support worker you'll be working with
- a social story to help us manage the transition



Why this works for young people who often miss out

- young people with SEMH needs are often NEET
- lots of NEET young people are put in statistics
- not often seen as real
- early intervention is really important
- consistency with long term support – good beginning to end



Our Short Breaks Ideas:

Puppy Yoga



Who it's for

- higher support needs
- anxious or overwhelmed
- family is exhausted
- not accessing activities



What happens

- pick up from the young person's house
- accessible taxi if needed
- one hour puppy yoga
- small group (£35 per person)



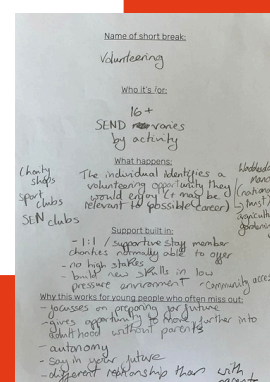
Support built in

- one to one support from parent or carer
- yoga teacher aware of needs
- you can leave at any time



Why this works for young people who often miss out

- it's calm
- sensory environment
- not much talking and less interaction with other people
- it's non-demanding
- not suitable for people with dog phobias or allergies



Our Short Breaks Ideas:

Concert and Meal: Accessible experience



Who it's for

- someone with an EHCP
- physical disability or impairments
- hearing sensory loss (14 to 18)



What happens

- go to a small concert and a meal out



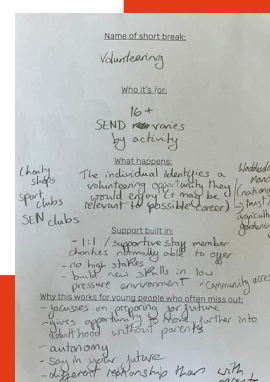
Support built in

- option to sit down / seated areas
- option to go with someone else attending
- BSL support
- hearing impairment friendly



Why this works for young people who often miss out

- concerts can be very inaccessible
- lots of young people want to try them but can't



Our Short Breaks Ideas:

Other ideas



Space Hoppers

Who it's for

- those who are interested in space

What happens

- learn and talk about different parts of space
- guest speakers
- interactive elements (models, projectors, telescopes)

Support built in

- helping people socialise through a shared interest

Why this works

- gives common ground for people who find socialising difficult



Audiobook Group

Who it's for

- those who have difficulty with reading
- different age groups (teens or young adults)

What happens

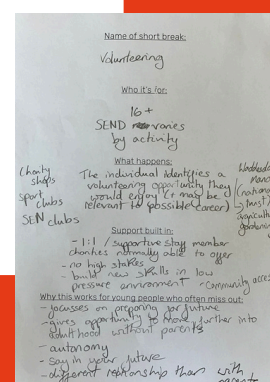
- listen to a chapter of a book then talk about it
- could be in person or online

Support built in

- support to help explain or catch up during the session

Why this works

- helps people who feel embarrassed about reading
- supports making friends



Short Breaks Ideas:

Wider Comments

Alongside specific activities and ideas, one of our Reps also shared wider experiences about what can make short breaks harder to access and sustain in real life.

- caring responsibilities can be ongoing, even outside of activities, with some families providing support 24/7
- some young people feel their needs are overlooked if they are able to communicate or achieve academically
- families may feel under pressure, including being at risk of giving up work to provide care
- stress from lack of support can impact carers' own health and wellbeing
- access to direct payments can be limited, making it harder to use existing support networks
- voluntary and community services are often filling gaps, especially where provision has reduced

Summary: What we noticed across the session

Throughout the session, young people explored a range of short breaks, shared what works and what doesn't, and designed ideas for what should exist in the future. Across all activities and discussions, several clear patterns emerged.

Short breaks work best when they feel safe and predictable

- Knowing what to expect makes a big difference
- Consistency in people and places helps build trust
- Transitions need to be clearly explained and planned

Group environments work for some, but not for everyone

- Some young people enjoy meeting others and socialising
- Others find groups overwhelming, noisy, or difficult to access
- There is a need for more options beyond group-based provision

Summary: What we noticed across the session

Flexibility and choice are important

- Being able to leave, take breaks, or not join in reduces pressure
- Activities that adapt to different needs work better
- One-size-fits-all approaches don't work

Support makes the difference

- Support needs to be built into activities, not added on
- Staff understanding of SEND varies and impacts experiences
- Clear communication and preparation are important

Access affects who can take part

- Travel and transport are barriers for many young people
- Cost and funding can limit what is available
- Some environments are too busy, loud, or inaccessible

Summary: What we noticed across the session

Short breaks are also about independence and the future

- Many young people value opportunities to build confidence and life skills
- Real-world experiences (e.g. volunteering, community activities) are important
- Short breaks can play a role in preparing for adulthood

Overall

Young people showed a clear understanding of what makes short breaks work well and what can stop them working.

There was a strong focus on the importance of feeling safe, having flexibility, and receiving the right support, alongside a clear message that current provision does not always work for those who need it most.

The ideas designed during the session highlight the need for more inclusive, flexible, and real-world short break opportunities.

Comments from our guests:

Wendy, Ro and Moz

- “a big thank you to the amazing group of young people... they really are an incredible group, a great bunch of young people who have so much to offer
- we really appreciated the opportunity to hear their views, ideas, and feedback on Short Breaks provision
- it’s so important to us... that we listen, learn, and understand where improvements can be made, and where the gaps are, right from the start
- we were especially struck by how enthusiastic everyone was about being involved so early in the recommissioning process
- we thoroughly enjoyed our session... and are looking forward to continuing working with them
- fantastic ideas... including an audio book club, a space club, and an outdoor club like Scouts but specifically designed for children and young people with SEND
- we need to review how we explain ‘Short Breaks’
- terms like ‘universal, targeted and specialist’ are not very clear, so we’ll work on making this easier to understand”

What next?

What is going to happen as a result of our voices and this report?

- Wendy and Ro will continue their consultation with more young people, as well as parents and carers
- Once they have developed ideas for short breaks, they will come back to Shout Out for SEND
- They want our group to help review the options and make decisions about what should actually be commissioned
- Young people will help shape a question to ask providers during the tender process

Designing SEND-Friendly HAF Provision

This May session wasn't originally planned to focus on HAF (Holidays and Food), but the ideas shared are really useful for thinking about how HAF activities could be made more SEND-friendly. Everything here reflects what young people said would actually help them take part - not just what already exists:

What helps activities work

SOfS Reps told us activities are easier to take part in when:

- they know what's going to happen before they go
- there are staff who understand their needs
- they can take a break or leave if they need to
- groups are smaller or less overwhelming
- the activity feels calm or low pressure
- the support is already built in, not added afterwards

What makes it hard to take part

SOfS Reps said they are less likely to attend when:

- they don't know what to expect
- it's too noisy, busy, or overwhelming
- the group feels too intense or pressured
- there's no flexibility
- transport is difficult
- the activity doesn't feel inclusive

What HAF activities could look like

Ideas from young people

Young people came up with a range of ideas that could work well for HAF, including:

- animal-based activities (like dog rescue or puppy yoga)
- outdoor SEND groups that build confidence over time
- volunteering linked to future jobs and interests
- interest-based groups (like space or books)
- accessible versions of “normal” activities (like concerts or social events)

Key things to get right

To make HAF more accessible, young people said it’s important to:

- build support into the activity from the start
- clearly explain what will happen beforehand
- keep group sizes manageable
- allow flexibility and choice
- have staff who understand SEND
- think about transport as part of access