



Dorset Council



Hampshire County Council



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Schools out!

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Press Release

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For Immediate Release

SCHOOL'S OUT FOR SUMMER! THE REPTILE ACADEMY OFFERS OVER 200 FREE HOLIDAY PLACES FOR DORSET & HAMPSHIRE CHILDREN

The Reptile Academy is offering more than 200 free HAF places this summer, giving children across Dorset and Hampshire the chance to enjoy hands-on reptile encounters, science workshops, outdoor activities and hot, nutritious meals throughout the school holidays. *There are 20-spaces for fee-paying children.*

The Reptile Academy is delighted to announce the continuation and of its local authority-funded **Reptile Ranger Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme**. Funded by **Dorset Council**, **Hampshire County Council**, and the **Department for Education**, in collaboration with Dorset's *HelpAndKindness* and Hampshire's *Connect4Communities*, the initiative will provide over **200 free places** for children aged **8 to 16** this Summer; **170+** for **Dorset families** and **40+** for **Hampshire families**, alongside **20 additional fee-paying places** for children not eligible for HAF or residing outside of these areas.

Starting on **Thursday 23rd July** and running through to **Thursday 27th August 2026**, the Summer HAF sessions will take place at **The Reptile Academy, Manor Farm, Gussage St. Michael, BH21 5HT**, offering a unique, educational, and heartwarming holiday experience where children can meet, handle, and learn about reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates in a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment.



Photo 1: Figure 1 Attendees of a recent HAF programme having worked together to build 5 mini vivaria for our invertebrate residents!

What does a Reptile Ranger HAF Day include this Summer?

As always, our programme combines **hands-on science and animal care** with the **excitement of a holiday club**. Each day includes a **hot lunch**, with vegetarian, vegan, religious and allergen-friendly alternatives available, plus healthy snacks and drinks. Food highlights have included lamb roast dinners, beef stew and dumplings, pasta bolognese, cottage pie and other nutritious family meals across the holiday. Healthy eating is an integral part of HAF nationally and we embody that at The Reptile Academy.

As well as food, children will enjoy a variety of activities, including:

- **Animal handling and encounters** with snakes, lizards, tortoises, frogs, and some invertebrates.
- **Microscopy and science sessions** exploring reptile biology and ecosystems.
- **Animal enrichment projects**, helping improve welfare and stimulate natural behaviours.
- **Outdoor activities and physical play**, ensuring every child stays active and engaged. Days feature a tortoise 'race', giant snakes 'n' ladders as well as traditional board games.
- **Diet and nutrition**, where young people will be able to link healthy diets and lifestyles in animals, such as with the *Eat like an Iguana* workshop, to their own food intake.

A Word from Dr. Jake Weeks

"We're incredibly proud to be welcoming even more children and young people to The Reptile Academy this summer," said Dr. Jake Weeks, Founder and Volunteer Director of The Reptile Academy.

"Thanks to the continued support of Dorset Council, Hampshire County Council, the Department for Education, Help And Kindness and Connect4Communities, we're able to provide more than 200 funded Holiday Activities and Food places across Dorset and Hampshire, alongside additional subsidised places for fee-paying families. Every place represents an opportunity for a child to enjoy a safe, enriching and memorable summer, whilst learning about science, conservation and animal welfare through hands-on experiences with our incredible reptiles and amphibians.

The school holidays can be a difficult time for many families, particularly those supporting children with SEND or SEMH needs. Our aim is to provide more than just a holiday club. We create a welcoming environment where young people can build confidence, develop friendships, learn new skills and enjoy nutritious meals in a setting where they feel understood and supported.

As a volunteer-led, not-for-profit social enterprise, every HAF programme helps sustain our wider educational and conservation work throughout the year. It enables us to continue caring for more than 100 resident reptiles and amphibians, maintain our specialist facilities and reinvest into improving the experiences we offer to the community. None of this would be possible without the dedication of our volunteer team, many of whom give up annual leave and personal time to make these sessions happen. We're incredibly grateful to everyone who supports us, and we can't wait to welcome both returning and new Reptile Rangers this summer."

Recently in June, The Reptile Academy successfully renewed its Animal Activities Licence, increasing its licensed capacity from 101 to 200 reptiles and amphibians following inspection.

Some Changes for Families from Summer 2026

Many families will be aware of changes to the HAF programme nationally including eligibility and the support available, surrounding the difference between *Targeted Free School Meals* and *Expanded Free School Meals*. If you have been affected by these changes, The Reptile Academy is still here to signpost those in our community to support services from Foodbanks to Mental Wellbeing and SEN support. If you think you are entitled to HAF but do not have a code, please contact us.

For Hampshire families, there are no significant changes to our programme delivery since Easter 2026. Those children who have HAF eligibility are entitled to **6-hour (10am – 4pm) HAF days** with 1:1 support available for children with an EHCP with 1:1 support requirements and more complex needs (subject to individual approval). In total, 40 spaces are available.

Spaces are limited to two sessions per child to ensure as many different children can access our scheme as possible. Hampshire families must book via the Eequ website and not our central booking form.



Scan the QR code or click the link below for more!

[Reptile Ranger Holiday Activities & Food Club with The Reptile Academy - Eequ](#)

For Dorset families, the HAF code now allows children to be booked onto up to 2-places per child for full, 6-hr days (10am-4pm) with additional places funded for **4-hour (10am – 2pm) HAF days**. This is so that every child can benefit at least twice from full days whilst funding can be stretched to more children and providers in the area (with a whopping 170+ spaces available).

Should Dorset children like to extend their day with us from 4-hours to 6-hours for additional days (i.e. more than 2 days), an **additional cost of £24** will apply per child per day.

There are no limits to how many sessions Dorset children can book on with us.

For fee-paying families, the cost of our HAF provision is £42 for a 4-hour session (10am to 2pm) or £66 for a 6-hour session (10am to 4pm). We have 20 subsidised fee-paying spaces to begin with over the Summer period to ensure inclusivity for all. We have also helped many families access discretionary places at no-cost, subject to eligibility and spaces available on the scheme.

Due to popularity and for safeguarding reasons, The Reptile Academy will continue to be operating holiday clubs on a drop-off and pick-up basis. We appreciate your support with this. If your child requires 1:1 support, please do get in touch, as we can facilitate this.

Accessibility and Support

The programme continues The Reptile Academy's strong commitment to **SEND and SEMH inclusivity**. The site offers full wheelchair access, quiet indoor and outdoor spaces for sensory breaks, and staff with training and lived experience supporting neurodiverse learners. With the summer weather having arrived, participants can enjoy the calm and tranquil farm setting.

Where required, **1:1 support** can be arranged by prior agreement, and The Reptile Academy encourages parents and carers to discuss any specific needs in advance and detail these in the booking form.

Signposting Support Resources

At The Reptile Academy, we are committed to supporting the whole family, not just during our HAF sessions, but beyond them too. On our website, we've created a growing hub of **signposted resources** to help families access further support, from **food banks** and **SENDIASS services**, to **mental health support, family wellbeing, financial assistance**, and more.

This is an **expanding section** of our site, designed to connect families with relevant services both locally and nationally. Whether you're looking for help with **school uniforms, early help services**, or **local support groups**, we aim to make useful information as accessible as possible.

📍 Visit: www.reptileacademy.co.uk/haf

If you are a provider or professional and would like us to highlight a service or resource in your area, please **email us at** education@reptileacademy.co.uk, we welcome your input and are always looking to improve the signposting we offer to families across Dorset, Hampshire, and beyond.



Photo 2: Hot hearty lunches are an important part of our day! The Reptile Academy serves nutritious, home-cooked food that leaves young people wanting more!

How do the FREE places work?

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme is funded by the Department for Education and administered by local authorities across England. Councils are encouraged to allocate **at least 85% of funded places to children and young people eligible for means-tested Free School Meals (FSM)**.

The remaining **15% can be distributed at the local authority's discretion**, often prioritising children with additional vulnerabilities, such as those with **SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)** or **SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health)** needs, including those with **EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans)**.

While discretionary places are not guaranteed, we strongly encourage families who believe their child may qualify to **get in touch with our team**. We'll be happy to support you in accessing a place or guiding you through the process if you may be eligible. Last year we did have children outside of Dorset and Hampshire or those not entitled to FSM given a discretionary HAF place.

How do the fee-paying places work?

The **fee-paying cost ranges between £42 and £66 per day**, depending on whether a child is attending for 4-hours or 6-hours and whether they have a HAF code. For example a child with a Hampshire HAF code can attend for 6-hours for free, but a Dorset child with a HAF code could attend for 6-hours for free for the first two sessions and then 4-hours for free and then optionally top up to 6-hours for an additional £24.



Photo 3: Young people at The Reptile Academy complete a range of activities that they would otherwise never get to do at a zoo! The programme also caters for 8s-16s, with a good number of teens in attendance, so it's an inclusive space for older HAF children.

All sessions include a hot lunch, healthy snacks, expert-led structured animal activities, and accredited learning experiences. This is the same great experience for all.

Specialist provision includes smaller sub-group sizes, increased staffing ratios, and tailored support for children with additional needs, such as those with SEND or SEMH. This also reflects the expertise and experience of our specialist staff, who are trained in working with neurodivergent children and those requiring additional pastoral care.

Specialist provision excludes 1:1 support, which may be available free-of-charge where a child is entitled under their local authority's HAF or SEND guidelines, which varies between authorities. Please contact our team if you'd like to discuss this further - we're happy to help.

Some recent feedback!

"Absolutely wonderful team of people. Thank you all for your time and effort. You really made the day so special and my child absolutely loved every second. He asked when he can do it again while we were still driving home! Thank you 😊"

"Great knowledge and understanding for SEN needs. Still can't believe how confident he was in the second session not needing carer support. Thank you so much for giving him confidence and keeping him so engaged"

"My child loves to attend the reptile centre and spend time with the animals. One of very few clubs he actually gets on with during the holidays and it's great he's happy and comfortable within the setting and that the staff go above and beyond to help support him throughout the day."

"The team of keepers were absolutely lovely. My daughter came home completely inspired & fired up to learn more about reptiles. She can't wait to go again!"

"As a parent, I couldn't be more grateful for what the Reptile Academy has given my son - he's truly felt seen and supported. From the moment he attended, the staff have been incredibly warm, patient, and genuinely enthusiastic. My son has a deep passion for reptiles, it has expanded his

knowledge and is constantly sharing new facts, techniques, and stories from his day. But more than that, it's given him a sense of purpose. He shows up not just to learn, but to care for the animals. He feels responsible, valued, and proud of the role he plays. Reptile Academy has nurtured his special interest and turned it into something meaningful, in a time that usually causes him a lot of distress - the structure of the programme throughout the holiday period has had such a positive impact. It has been a struggle for many years to find a club that meets his needs. Thank you!"

How to Book a Place

Dorset and fee-paying Families can book directly via The Reptile Academy's online booking portal:

 [Book Now at The Reptile Academy](#)

- **Dorset FSM Families (Free HAF Places):** Enter your HAF code in the booking system for each child and select your authority. A member of the team will verify eligibility and confirm your place.
- **Fee-Paying Families:** A small number of places are available for families outside the eligible areas. We'll send you a payment link shortly after receiving your booking by email.

Hampshire families can book at [Reptile Ranger Holiday Activities & Food Club with The Reptile Academy - Eequ](#) or by following the QR code. Once booked and approved, we'll manually add you to our central booking platform to ensure you get reminders and updates.



Places are limited and allocated on a **first-come, first-served basis (170 Dorset+, 40+ Hampshire)**. Places are **non-transferable and non-refundable**, to ensure continuity of provision.

Contact Information

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 www.reptileacademy.co.uk

 The Reptile Academy, Manor Farm, Gussage St. Michael, Dorset, BH21 5HT

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About The Reptile Academy

The Reptile Academy is an innovative, educational centre dedicated to providing **hands-on, interactive learning experiences** with **reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates**. Based in **Cranborne Chase AONB**, the Academy specialises in **alternative provision education, SEND & SEMH support, accredited qualifications, residential programmes, and public reptile encounters**. It is committed to **wildlife conservation, responsible pet ownership, and inspiring the next generation of animal carers and conservationists**.

The Reptile Academy offers a broad range of other educational experiences, including:

- Alternative Provision Placements for young people needing specialist learning environments. These usually take place on Wednesday morning for adults and Wednesday and Friday afternoons for children.
- The Reptile Ranger Residential Programme for students pursuing careers in animal care and conservation, biology, zoology and veterinary medicine.
- Gold Duke of Edinburgh's Award Residentials focused on hands-on reptile care and environmental learning.
- Accredited Courses such as the **ASDAN in Animal Care Short Course** and **AQA UAS Certificates** in scientific and environmental studies.
- Reptile Experiences for families, children, and adults, including **family encounters, keeper days, and VIP sessions**.
- By integrating **education, conservation, and hands-on engagement**, The Reptile Academy remains a leader in **herpetology education and outreach**, ensuring that every visitor leaves with a **deeper understanding of wildlife and a passion for animal welfare**.

**A Centre of Excellence for Reptile &
Amphibian Education & Animal Welfare**