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New Alliance calls for urgent action from local authorities to ensure £220m school holiday programme works for the most disadvantaged

A new coalition launches today (Thursday 18 March) to help local authorities make a success of the government's expanded £220 million Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, ensuring multiple benefits for children, families and communities who have been hit hard by the pandemic.

The [Holiday Activities and Food \(HAF\) Alliance](#) pools the expertise of some of

the UK's leading not-for-profit organisations who have years of experience working in communities to alleviate inequalities, food poverty and inactivity.

Northumbria University is one of the founding members of the Alliance following its outstanding research undertaken by the [Healthy Living Lab](#) into school and community breakfast clubs, school meals, holiday activity and food programmes, food insecurity and holiday hunger.

The University is the only higher education member of the Alliance and research from the Lab - which has shown the importance of programmes which support some of our most disadvantaged children, parents and communities - has led to a national shift in school breakfast programmes and has directly influenced the development and expansion of the Department for Education's [Holiday Activities and Food programme](#) in England.

A [brochure outlining Northumbria's extensive expertise](#) in the field was shared with all attendees at the event.

With a range of prominent experts backing the new Alliance, including Children and Families Minister, Vicky Ford MP, and Policy Advisor to No 10 on The National Food Strategy Henry Dimbleby, the Alliance is calling on local authorities to use their collective wisdom for strategic planning advice, implementation, delivery support and evaluation as they are preparing to deliver the Department for Education's (DfE) [Holiday Activities and Food programme in England](#) this summer.

School holidays can be particular pressure points for some families because of the increased costs of food and childcare, reduced incomes and the lack of free healthy meals. For some children that can lead to a holiday experience gap. Those children from disadvantaged families are less likely to access organised out-of-school activities and are more likely to experience 'unhealthy holidays' in terms of nutrition, social isolation and physical wellbeing.

[Professor Greta Defeyter](#), Professor of Developmental Psychology, is Director of the University's Healthy Living Lab and one of the founding members of the Alliance. She said: "The importance of an enriching holiday experience for all children cannot be underestimated, especially following a year in which large numbers of children have not physically attended school due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This summer, it is more important than ever that children, especially those living in areas of social deprivation, have access to best-in-class holiday programmes. This means a well-structured day full of fun activities that enable children and young people to learn new skills, socialise with friends, and enjoy nutritious food in a safe environment.

“On top of this, HAF programmes also alleviate parental stress and support children in returning to school. In the future I would like to see access to HAF programmes provided universally to all children, as is the current practice in Sweden.”

The HAF Alliance is being introduced today to 151 top tier English local authorities at a virtual conference hosted by television presenter and campaigner, Charlie Webster. The conference aims to showcase the resources and expertise of the HAF Alliance’s charities, community interest organisations and subject matter experts to support local authorities with planning and implementation of their holiday programmes during 2021. The Alliance has provided free access to research, tools, techniques and best practice, supported by evidence from years of implementing and evaluating HAF programmes.

Speaking at the conference, Vicky Ford MP said: “Our pioneering Holiday Activities and Food programme has been expanded this year for the first time, so it will benefit many more children than ever before. This year, especially, I want children to make the most of their school holidays, so I’m thrilled that there is so much support and enthusiasm for the programme.

“This significant expansion across the country and to every local authority will support even more disadvantaged children over the holidays with healthy meals, fun activities, and learning opportunities. It’s fantastic to see the HAF Alliance coming together as we begin our work alongside local communities to deliver this hugely important support, beginning at Easter in line with remaining restrictions and growing further in the summer.”

Key-note speeches and workshops will be given by some of the country’s leading subject matter experts on food poverty, diet, healthy active lifestyles and child services, including Henry Dimbleby independent lead on the National Food Strategy and author of The School Food Plan; Andrew Forsey, National Director of Feeding Britain; and Tim Hollingsworth, CEO of Sport England.

In June 2020, following the high-profile drive for action led by Marcus Rashford, the government announced the expansion of the HAF programme for 2021 following three years of pilots funded by the DfE with a number of local and national organisations.

The new £220m grant funding is allocated to 151 top-tier English local authorities to spend in 2021 on six weeks of free holiday club provision with food and activities for children and young people, aged 5-16, who are eligible for Free School Meals.

Many local authorities have been severely stretched by the pandemic over the past year and may not yet have delivered the kind of play and youth holiday provision that is the ideal model for HAF programmes. The Alliance hopes that in sharing its expertise and best practice, it can help local authorities to develop and deliver high quality holiday programmes for their local communities.

Jane Ashworth OBE, Founder of StreetGames and HAF Alliance spokesperson, said: “We have a perfect opportunity to use the energy of the 16 HAF Alliance members to motivate local authorities to go beyond a minimum-standards approach to HAF 2021 for children and young people and build a platform for future delivery. We’re urging all local authorities to get in touch with us now through www.hafalliance.org in time for the summer holidays.”

Find out more about Northumbria University’s research and evaluation of holiday programmes in the UK at www.northumbria.ac.uk/holidayprogrammes

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