



Professor Greta Defeyter, Cllr Guy Renner Thompson and HAF Plus participants and staff at Northumbria University

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Young people praise Northumbria University for delivery of HAF Plus pilot

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[The 'Story Chair' programme](#) from [Northumbria University](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Northumbria University has been praised by young people and local councils for its work to successfully provide a Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Plus programme for almost 100 North East teenagers during the school summer holidays.

The [HAF programme](#), delivered by councils across England, provides children and young people in receipt of means-tested, free school meals – or otherwise in need during the school holiday period – with opportunities to get involved in physical and cultural activities and with access to healthy meals.

After research revealed teenagers didn't feel the existing HAF programme met their needs, researchers at Northumbria co-designed a variant of the standard programme with young people for those aged 13-18. Known as HAF Plus, the initiative – which first ran in a number of local boroughs in 2022 – was piloted at the University over the summer holidays.

Working with partners including Gateshead, Newcastle and Northumberland Councils, Leading Link, Street Games, Chartwells and Big River Bakery, Northumbria University delivered a schedule of free activities including climbing, dodgeball, gym sessions and MMA training in its £30m Sport Central facility. They also provided careers support and team building activities using VR and AI technology, alongside cooking and baking sessions to support the development of essential cooking skills.

The sessions have received praise from attendees and council leaders highlighting the new opportunities the partnerships have provided.

Eighteen-year old Josh said: “I’m actually going to be studying at Northumbria University next year so coming on site, seeing the facilities and engaging with the people here has been absolutely great. It was a brilliant day with some really good activities.”

Sixteen-year old Lucas, who worked with researchers in developing the new HAF Plus programme to ensure it best meets the needs of young people said: “Personally the programme has opened up a world of different things to me. I was able to visit London twice which was brilliant, and I’ve ended up meeting so many new people through the project. I couldn’t be more thankful for the opportunities I’ve been given.

“I feel like HAF Plus is really important for people growing up. Young kids find themselves on the streets, some getting in trouble from the police because they don’t have enough engaging and stimulating things to get involved in. HAF Plus has something for everyone and that’s really that’s the main goal – to have a holiday activity provision for everyone, for all age groups and for everyone to be included.”

Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson, Northumberland County Councillor and Cabinet Member for Inspiring Young People said: “The Holiday Activity Fund is so important to us. I speak to families across Northumberland who wouldn’t know what to do in the summer holidays without it. Northumbria University has done fantastic work, and I look forward to continue to collaborate with them”

[Professor Greta Defeyter](#), Director of the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University, led the co-development of the new HAF Plus programme. She said: “All the activity that was provided at Northumbria University this summer was chosen by the young people we work with. They had a choice of activities including everything from physical activities, cooking and learning about healthy choices to entrepreneurship and CV writing.

“Whilst HAF is a really good programme, our research revealed it didn’t meet the needs of teenagers in its current form.

“If we want to help young people reach their potential and reduce anti-social behaviour – which is really important because youth services across the UK have been decimated in the last decade - we need to provide them with opportunities that will narrow the educational attainment gap and increase social mobility, so we need a programmes like HAF Plus operating in local authorities across England.”

Professor Defeyter said that she hoped the government would build on the successful HAF programme and broaden the eligibility criteria of children and young people who can attend to include a greater number of children and young people and not just those who qualify for means-tested free school meals. She suggested a targeted universal approach, like Family Hubs in which all are welcome. She also called on other organisations to support HAF and HAF Plus to make it more widely available.

In the UK millions of children who rely on free school meals are at dietary risk during the school holidays. Research has also shown that children and young people experience learning loss following school holidays, and this is most pronounced in children living in poverty. Providing activities for children and young people has been shown to be effective in attenuating lost learning and in learning new skills.

Speaking on the decision to run the programme Professor Graham Wynn, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education at Northumbria University said: “We know that the long summer break can be a real challenge for many families and children, so we’ve been delighted to welcome HAF Plus participants to campus this summer.

“Our three key strategic ambitions are to power an inclusive economy, drive social mobility and create new knowledge. This synergises our education and research to make sure that we are empowering our region and the nation to address our greatest economic and skills challenges. HAF Plus forms a fundamental part of this.

“Through HAF Plus we can reach beyond the usual boundaries of higher education and engage students at a much earlier stage, bringing them onto a university campus in the summer to engage them in exciting activities and at the same time allow them to broaden their horizons, ask questions about themselves and their own ambitions and to help them set new goals in life.”

Professor Defeyter and the Healthy Living Lab research team were instrumental in the national roll out of school breakfast clubs and have since gone on to demonstrate the need for the government to ensure that children and their families were also provided for in the school holidays. Their research findings directly impacted the Department for Education's decision to invest £220 million into its HAF programmes for the whole of England.❌❌❌

Northumbria University is dedicated to reducing health and social inequalities, contributing to the regional and national workforce and improving social, economic and health outcomes for the most marginalised in society. Through its new Centre for Health and Social Equity, researchers will be delivering world-leading health and social equity research and creating innovative, evidence-based policies and data-driven solutions to bring impactful change across the region, the UK and globally.❌❌❌❌

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