



Professor Greta Defeyter.

Dec 31, 2024 06:30 GMT

OBE for researcher who evidenced importance of school breakfast and holiday clubs

A Northumbria University academic who played a key role in bringing breakfast clubs and holiday activities to millions of children across the country has been rewarded for her work in the King's New Year's Honours List.

Professor Greta Defeyter, Director of the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University, has been awarded an OBE in recognition of services to education.

Professor Defeyter has spent the last 20 years researching how meals and enriching activities can be, and are being, provided to millions of children across the UK through schools and community organisations.

Her work has significantly influenced the Department for Education's rollout of a National School Breakfast programme and funding of the Holiday Activities and Food programme for children and young people across England.

She established the Healthy Living Lab in 2006 to investigate the impacts of school breakfast clubs on children's health, social and educational wellbeing. Working with Kellogg's, the Greggs Foundation and Blackpool Council between 2008 and 2019, her research demonstrated that breakfast clubs can improve school attendance and punctuality, motivation, social relationships, educational attainment and quality of life for many children.

This evidence has supported the nationwide expansion of breakfast clubs over the past fifteen years. In September the Chancellor announced a £315 million free breakfast club programme that would provide free school breakfast clubs in all state-funded primary schools next year.

Recognising that school holidays brought difficulties for many families, Professor Defeyter expanded her research. Her evaluations of holiday clubs and city-wide holiday programmes evidenced the need for the UK government to alleviate holiday hunger and ensure that children and young people were offered nutritious food and engaging activities outside of term time as well as during the academic year.

As a result, in 2021 the government announced that up to £220 million was being made available to local authorities across England to fund the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.

HAF and the new HAF Plus programme, which has been co-designed to make it more engaging for older children, provide activities and healthy food to nearly one million children and young people during the school holidays each year. The HAF Plus framework has also been adopted by supporting organisations, such as Kitchen Social, funded by the Mayor's Fund for London, and has been implemented across all London boroughs.

More recently, Professor Defeyter has been researching broader issues around poverty, school meals, and the Healthy Start Scheme. Through her work with national charities, schools, supermarkets, and caterers, she is currently advising the UK and Scottish Governments on developing national strategies and policies to eliminate the need for food banks. This includes the introduction of Affordable Food Clubs and Cash First Plus programmes; both designed to maximise household income and improve dietary intake and overall wellbeing.

The Order of the British Empire (OBE) is awarded to those who have made a significant impact in the arts, sciences, charitable work and public service.

Professor Defeyter said: “I am both delighted and astonished at being awarded an OBE. To be recognised in this manner for my research with children, young people and families is a humbling experience.

“Most importantly, I would like to thank all the organisations, local authorities, charities, children, young people, parents and carers who trusted me, and worked alongside me to conduct this research that has enabled societal change.

“Finally, I wish to thank all my research colleagues within the Healthy Living Lab for all of their support in conducting the research that has made a difference to millions of children and young people. I thank you all!”

Professor Andy Long, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of Northumbria University, said: “We are delighted to see this recognition for Greta and her work. It is clear that her research over the last two decades has informed and influenced government decision making which has led to a positive, and meaningful, impact on the lives of children and families across the country.”

Professor Defeyter has already received several accolades for her work. In 2006 she was named as a Children’s Food Hero by Sustain, following notable award winners, Jamie Oliver and Ed Balls. In 2015, she was made a Fellow of the British Psychological Society in recognition of her research with children living in areas of social and economic deprivation, and in 2020 she was named as one of the country’s top 100 change makers by the Big Issue for her research and policy impact on childhood food poverty in the UK.

She has a number of executive roles and fellowships with organisations. These include being an executive member of the North East Child Poverty Commission, a Fellow and incoming President of the Health and Food Council at the Royal Society of Medicine, and Chair of Feeding Britain's Academic Advisory Board.

Professor Defeyter will formally receive her OBE at a ceremony later in the year.

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