

MP Briefing: Healthy Start digital food scheme letting down low-income families

The process to digitise Healthy Start began in October 2021. Families have been reporting multiple problems with applying for the cards, using them and trying to access the helpline. The last Healthy Start paper voucher is due to be issued at the end of March. The deadline for eligible families to re-register, apply for a new digital card and transfer with no loss of funds is **10 March**. Frontline public health teams, food organisations and child health clinicians are concerned that many more families will lose out on a benefit they are entitled to. According to estimates by Sustain, more than 300,000 families in England, Wales and Northern Ireland could miss out on free healthy food funds after the transition, a benefit worth over £1,200 over a child's early years.

March 2022

Overview

- The Healthy Start scheme offers funds worth £4.25 per week to pregnant women and children (0-4 years) who are in low-income families, as well as to all pregnant women under the age of 18. Funds can be used to purchase fruit, vegetables, milk and infant formula.
- The voucher system is being digitised, and anyone who currently receives paper vouchers needs to re-register by **10 March** for a prepaid card - there is no automatic transfer of current beneficiaries to the new digital system.
- If managed properly, the digitisation of Healthy Start could help to reduce access barriers to the scheme. However, [Sustain, the Food Foundation and our partners](#) are receiving multiple reports from families and public health teams about issues with the new digital card scheme. The transition to the new system could leave thousands of families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland at risk of losing a vital nutritional safety net.
- Uptake of Healthy Start has been historically low; according to Sustain's estimates £63.5 million went unclaimed in 2021 alone, despite the hard work of organisations and retailers to increase awareness and uptake during Covid-19.
- We are concerned with a) the loss to families at a critical time following the rising cost of living, and b) issues surrounding accountability and the auditing of the process given that the Government is not collating vital service level information.
- This briefing gives an overview of the issues reported by service users and recommends solutions **that Department for Health and Social Care and NHS Business Services Authority should act on urgently.**

Feedback from service users

- Since digitisation began in October 2021, eligible families, health professionals and local community groups from England, Wales and Northern Ireland have reported that **the online application process is rejecting many eligible individuals**. We have also heard from the

Government, that the Department for Health **does not collect data** on how many applications have been rejected.

- As of 27 February 2022, there were still 338,656 families on the paper voucher scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and data from the NHS BSA shows only 36% actually received vouchers that month. This means that for the families who haven't moved to digital, over **200,000 didn't even receive the paper vouchers in February**.
- Users contacting the Healthy Start customer service centre **have experienced lengthy waiting times** (up to 120 minutes) and are being cut-off in some cases. Additionally, users not on payment plans are being **charged up to 55p a minute for their calls**. Based on the NHS call charges, we calculate this charge could range from £36 to £66 for a 120-minute wait. A single call at that rate would quickly exceed a low-income family's meal budget for the entire week.
- We have also heard reports from users, food businesses and retailers about issues around the functionality of the card. These include:
 - The card does **not allow for part payments**, and users have reported having to separate out their Healthy Start items at the checkout, thus causing delays in payment and stigma.
 - The cards **cannot be used to make online payments**, despite this being possible with Scotland's equivalent Best Start scheme. As a result, small businesses, local enterprises and online-only retailers are being excluded from the scheme.
- We are also concerned about the **low awareness and uptake of the vouchers**. We have calculated, based on NHS BSA's uptake data for England, that 46% of eligible families were not registered for the scheme in 2021, missing out on an estimated £63,537,601 of voucher payments across the whole year. The scheme needs effective, national promotion in order to achieve its objectives to tackle health inequalities.

Recommendations

In light of the above issues, we are asking MPs to support us in calling on the DHSC to:

- **Publish regular uptake data, data on the number of rejections and a progress report** combining both the paper and digital scheme so local authorities and community groups can understand uptake in their areas and target promotion where needed.
- **Immediately investigate and resolve the technical errors** being reported by health professionals and users.
- **Continue the paper vouchers beyond March 2022** until the digital application issues are resolved, so no families miss out on weekly funds.
- **Move the Healthy Start call lines to free 0800 numbers**, similar to Universal Credit call lines.
- **Commit to a £5 million promotional campaign**, as recommended in the National Food Strategy, to target eligible families, their healthcare professionals and retailers
- **Enable online payments using Healthy Start cards** so that users can access online retailers, as well as local social enterprises and services that provide healthy and sustainable food for low-income families in their community.
- **Extend the scheme to all families in receipt of Universal Credit**, rather than limit to those with an income of £408 a month or less. This would support the Government's levelling up agenda and help even more families to secure a healthy start whilst food prices soar.

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