

Urgent investment required in the Healthy Start food scheme

SUMMARY

- The Healthy Start scheme provides pregnant women or pre-school aged children in low-income households with a weekly payment to spend on healthy foods.
- To help these households to eat well during the cost of living crisis, the scheme should urgently be expanded and strengthened – by increasing the eligibility criteria, uptake rates and value of the scheme, and by resolving outstanding issues associated with the scheme's digitisation process.

What is the Healthy Start scheme?

- The 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 scheme operates in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. A separate scheme, Best Start Foods, operates in Scotland.
- Historically funds were distributed as paper vouchers but the scheme has recently been digitised, with recipients now receiving money via a prepaid card.
- The scheme provides a vital nutritional safety net to ensure that low-income children have access to healthy food in the crucial years before they start school.
- Good nutrition in childhood is essential for improving the long-term health and resilience of the population, reducing childhood obesity, and improving children's academic performance and long-term economic contributions.

Issues and challenges with the scheme

Healthy Start has great potential to help many more low-income families access better diets during the cost of living crisis, but its impact is currently hampered by the following issues:

Restrictive eligibility criteria result in children falling through the gaps:

- The current thresholds mean that many families experiencing food insecurity do not benefit – only those with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits are currently eligible.
- The scheme is currently only available to families with children under 4 years old, leaving a gap between Healthy Start ending and Free School Meals starting, during which children are at higher risk of food insecurity and poor quality diets.

- Though the scheme has been temporarily expanded to some children from households with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), not all children from these highly vulnerable families are eligible.

Uptake rates remain low:

- For all families to benefit from this scheme, a concerted effort from Government is needed to increase take-up.
- During the digitisation process, only beneficiaries previously signed up for paper vouchers were targeted by Government communications. Much wider promotion of the scheme is needed to reach those who have not yet signed up and remain unaware of the scheme.
- Many retailers promoted the scheme during the pandemic and introduced schemes to add value to the paper vouchers, but the new digital card doesn't allow them to continue to add value in this way.

The value of the scheme has not kept pace with rapid food price inflation:

- In April 2021, the Government increased the value of Healthy Start from £3.10 to £4.25 – the first increase in value that the scheme had seen since 2010. This was very welcome, but since then, food price inflation has risen very rapidly. Some products which can be purchased through the scheme, such as infant formula, have seen price rises that significantly outstrip average inflation.

The digitisation process is still subject to ongoing issues:

- The digitisation process has been fraught with difficulty, and some issues still remain. Beneficiaries of the scheme continue to experience issues with applying for and accessing the scheme, and capacity at the support centre is very limited.

4 actions to maximise Healthy Start's potential

1. Expand eligibility to more families in need

- Expand eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits with children under 5 years old, as recommended in the National Food Strategy. This would ensure that more children at risk of food insecurity can benefit, and would close the gap in support for 4 year olds before they start school.
- Consult immediately on the permanent extension of Healthy Start to all children in families with NRPF.

2. Increase uptake

- Commit to a £5m promotional campaign, as recommended in the National Food Strategy, which targets eligible families and the healthcare professionals who work with them.
- Establish a clear timeline, targets and strategy for increasing the uptake among eligible families.
- Publish uptake data online per local authority area and update it regularly.
- Organise a retailer roundtable to discuss promotion and ways to top up the value of Healthy Start.

3. Increase the value of the payments in line with rising food prices

- Increase payments to reflect inflation rates. This would more realistically support the feeding of formula-dependent infants in economically vulnerable families and protect families' ability to access nutrient-rich foods in the context of increasing food prices.

4. Address outstanding issues with the digital process

- Swiftly investigate and resolve any remaining technical errors being reported by health professionals and users.
- Host regular webinars for health professionals and community groups to update them on action being taken to resolve these issues and uptake of the scheme.
- Urgently invest in additional capacity for the support centre and ensure users are well-supported
- Automatically approve back-payments for beneficiaries previously on paper vouchers that have transitioned to digital cards after the last paper vouchers were issued.

For further information please contact Isabel Hughes – Policy Engagement Manager, The Food Foundation (Isabel.Hughes@foodfoundation.org.uk)

About The Food Foundation:

We are a young, dynamic, and impactful charity with a mission to change food policy and business practice to ensure everyone, across the UK, can afford and access a healthy diet, supplied by a sustainable food system. We are independent of all political parties and business. We work with others who believe there is a problem with the system and want to change it.