

## Recommendation 3b: The Healthy Start scheme, protecting the health of our youngest children

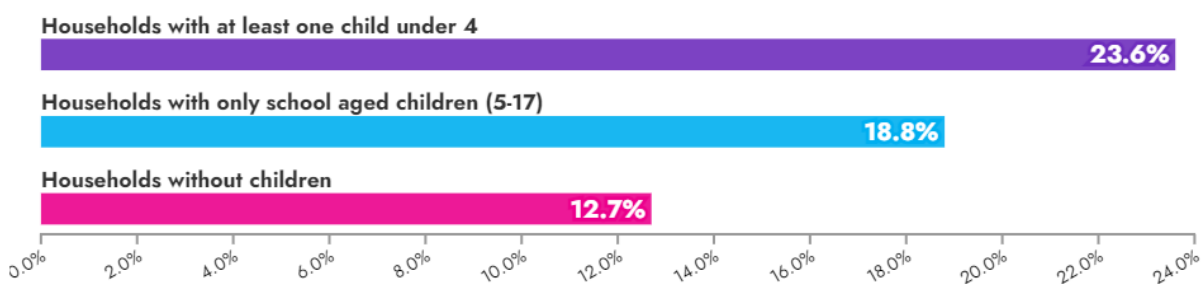
### SUMMARY

- Nutrition in a child's early years is crucial for development, laying the foundations for lifelong well-being. However, almost a quarter (23.6%) of UK households with pre-school children under 4 experience food insecurity.
- Disparities in consumption of healthy foods are worsening. 60% of households experiencing food insecurity are cutting back on purchasing fruit, while 44% are cutting back on vegetables and 52% on dairy and eggs.
- Swift action is required to breakdown the barriers hindering families from providing adequate nutrition to their children. This involves improving the effectiveness of the Healthy Start Scheme to guarantee the basic nutritional needs of infants born into low-income families.

### Food insecurity levels are highest among households with younger children

- Food insecurity among households with young children is a significant problem in the UK. According to [data](#) from the Food Foundation, almost 1 in 4 (23.6%) of households with a child under the age of 4 were experiencing food insecurity in January 2024.
- The early years are a critical window for establishing a child's development and lifelong health.
- These high rates of food insecurity highlight the need for policymakers to do much more to support our youngest children and babies.

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity\*:



\* 1-month recall period

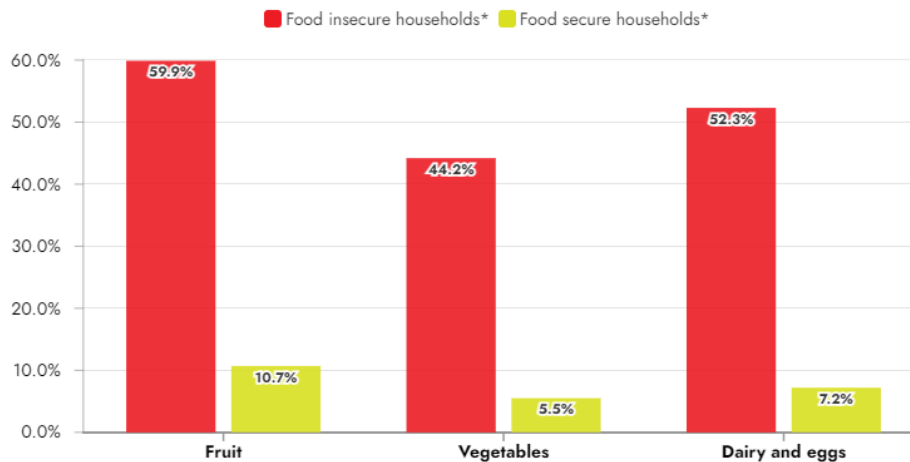


### Food insecurity negatively impacts on healthy food consumption

- The disparity in consumption of healthy foods between food secure and food insecure families is widening.
- Among households that reported experiencing food insecurity in January 2024, 60% reported cutting back on purchasing fruit, compared to 11% of food secure households. A similar pattern is observed across vegetables (44% of food insecure households cutting back compared to 6% of food secure) and dairy and eggs (52% food insecure households compared to 7% food secure households).

# Food insecure households were more likely to cut back on purchasing healthy foods in January 2024

Percentage of households reporting cutting back on purchases:



\* 1-month recall period



- Findings from the Food Foundation's [Kids Food Guarantee](#) revealed that a week's worth of fruit and veg for one person (equivalent to at least 35 portions) would cost between £8.67 and £13.24 depending on the retailer.
- This means that the poorest 10% of UK households may have to spend between 34- 52% of one person's weekly food budget to afford a week's worth of 5-a-day. In contrast, the wealthiest 10% of families would allocate 17-26% for the same purpose.
- This report also revealed that over 1 in 7 (14%) of the lowest priced fruit and veg available across the 7 major retailers contain added salt and/or sugar. This is concerning, given that fruit and veg products with added salt or sugar are not within the scope of the Healthy Start Scheme, limiting the options for low-income families to afford their 5-a-day.

## Strengthening the potential of the Healthy Start Scheme

- The Healthy Start Scheme helps support pregnant women or pre-school aged children in low-income households by offering a weekly payment to spend on fruits, vegetables, pulses, cow's milk and first infant formula. This scheme is critical to supporting good nutrition, increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and improving long-term health and resilience in the most vulnerable families with young children.
- The scheme provides £4.25 per week to those who are pregnant aged under 18, and pregnant women and parents of children under 4 in low-income families. The value is £8.50 for children from birth until their first birthday.
- The Healthy Start Scheme has great potential to help low-income families in accessing better diets. However, challenges such as low uptake rates, restrictive eligibility criteria, and the scheme's stagnant value against sizeable food price increases hinder its effectiveness. Addressing these challenges is vital to prevent children from slipping through the cracks during their crucial developmental stages.

## Key areas to address the challenges of the Healthy Start Scheme:

- 1. Increase uptake of Healthy Start, to ensure no eligible families miss out**
  - Introduce auto-enrolment, with an "opt-out" rather than the current "opt-in" system to remove barriers faced by families applying online or by post.
  - Increase uptake of Healthy Start. The Government should 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.
  - Resolve data sharing issues between the DWP and DHSC to ensure that all those eligible are informed and given opportunity to apply and benefit from Healthy Start
- 2. Increase the value of the Healthy Start allowance in line with inflation and price increases**
- 3. Expand eligibility of Healthy Start to more families in need**



- Expand eligibility to include all families on Universal Credit and equal benefits with children under 5 years old. The National Food Strategy recommended this to ensure that more children at risk of food insecurity can benefit. The Scottish equivalent scheme, Best Start Foods, is available to all families receiving Universal Credit.
- Consult immediately on the permanent extension of Healthy Start to all children in families with NRPF, as promised in [2021](#). In November 2023, The Food Foundation, Sustain, and 148 signatories from NGOs, local authorities and medical bodies sent a [letter to the government](#) urging them to conduct the committed consultation.

**As the UK approaches a General Election, The Food Foundation is urging all candidates and political parties to recognise the importance of improving the food system for achieving many societal goals. The Food Foundation’s manifesto ‘Nourishing the Nation’ presents a range of policy priorities aimed at transforming the current food system, reshaping the nation’s well-being and future.**

**You can find our Nourishing the Nation manifesto [here](#).**

For further information please contact Joss MacDonald, Public Affairs Lead: [joss.macdonald@foodfoundation.org.uk](mailto:joss.macdonald@foodfoundation.org.uk)