

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education, Chair of the Child Poverty Taskforce

Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Chair of the Child Poverty Taskforce

Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

15th January 2025

Dear Secretaries of State,

**Strengthen the Healthy Start Scheme to support pregnant women, babies and young children living in poverty**

We are writing to press the opportunity you have to use the upcoming Child Poverty Strategy to make essential improvements to the Healthy Start scheme. The Healthy Start scheme provides a critical nutritional safety net for many pregnant people and families with children under four years old who are living in poverty. Through weekly payments for food and multivitamin supplements, the scheme has huge potential to help families at risk of food insecurity. Sadly however, the scheme has been much neglected in recent years. Urgent improvements are therefore needed to prevent malnutrition and give children the best possible start in life.

The restrictive eligibility criteria for Healthy Start means that it is only available to a very small number of families – only pregnant people and those with children aged under four with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits. This means many families experiencing poverty cannot benefit. In contrast, the Scottish version of the scheme is available to all families on Universal Credit who are within the age bracket to qualify.

Furthermore, there are children falling through the gap when they stop being eligible for Healthy Start but are not yet in receipt of Free School Meals, as the scheme is only available to children up to the age of four. This can easily be addressed by increasing Healthy Start eligibility to families with children under five years old. There is a precedent in Wales where £1 million was included in the Welsh Government's Final Budget 2022-2023 to help bridge this gap.

There is also a need to increase the value of the weekly payments in line with inflation. In April 2021, the Government increased the value of Healthy Start from £3.10 to £4.25. However, since then it has remained stagnant despite food prices having risen drastically and evidence that the value of the payments isn't sufficient to cover the needs of beneficiaries.

Lastly, while the Department for Work and Pensions ceased to make eligibility data available, approximately a third of eligible families are not signed up to Healthy Start due to various barriers such as lack of awareness of the scheme and administrative hurdles. To ensure all eligible families are receiving their statutory right, we urge you to introduce an auto-enrolment system at the national level that would register eligible families to receive

Healthy Start using benefits data, unless families decide to opt out. This requires data-sharing between the Department for Work & Pensions who hold data that identifies children who are eligible for these schemes and the Department of Health and Social Care that administers the scheme. As a statutory scheme, funding for all eligible children should already be available.

Given how important Healthy Start is for the low-income families already benefiting from it, we know the scheme has great potential to help many more families living in poverty to access their basic right to food and reduce health inequalities.

We are calling on the government to:

- Expand eligibility to include all families on Universal Credit (£244m), and extend the age-eligibility to include children under five years old (£175m).
- Increase the value of the Healthy Start allowance in line with inflation and price increases (£184m).
- Introduce auto-enrolment, with an “opt-out” rather than the current “opt-in” system to remove barriers faced by families in applying (£148m including existing cost).

Yours sincerely,

Anna Taylor OBE, Executive Director, The Food Foundation

Tom Kerridge, Chef and Poverty Campaigner

Lynn Perry MBE, CEO, Barnardo's

Alison Morton, CEO, Institute of Health Visiting

Gill Walton, CEO, RCM

Dr Helen Stewart, Officer for Health Improvement, The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Andrew Forsey OBE, National Director, Feeding Britain

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain alliance for better food and farming

Sharon White OBE, CEO, School and Public Health Nurses Association

Nikita Sinclair, Joint Head of Programme (Children's Health and Food), Impact on Urban Health

Beth Farhat, Chair, North East Child Poverty Commission

Eddie Crouch, Chair, British Dental Association

Dr Vicky Sibson, Director, First Steps Nutrition Trust

Rob Percival, Head of Policy - Food and Health, The Soil Association

Maria Bryant, Professor of Public Health and Nutrition, FixOurFood, University of York

Dr Loukia Tzavella, Tenure Track Fellow, University of Liverpool

Heather Brown, Professor of Health Inequalities, Lancaster University

Professor Nicola Heslehurst, President, UK Association for the Study of Obesity

Hannah Cooper, Research and Campaigns Manager, Citizens Advice Newcastle

Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools

Graham Whitham, Chief Executive, Resolve Poverty

Martin Drewry, CEO, Healthy Poverty Action (HPA)

Leigh Elliot, CEO, Children North East

Emilie de Bruijn, Chair, Hartlepool Baby Bank

Inge Challinor, Inclusion Officer, Stockport Council

Teresa Johnson, Startwell Nutritionist, Birmingham Community NHS Foundation Trust

Sean Harris, Director of People, Learning and Community Engagement (Tees Valley Education)

Helen Starr-Keddle, Deputy Director, Food Matters,

Margaret Jones, Director of Public Health, Sefton MBC

Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University

Lauren Neill, Health Improvement, London Borough of Barnet,

Sandra Currie, Chief Executive Officer, Kidney Research UK

Bridget McGlinchy, Maternity and Early Years Public Health Officer, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Abigail Conway, CEO, Citizens Advice Northumberland

Katie Lockwood, 0-19 Health & Wellbeing Service Manager, Fresh Futures

Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group

Peter Maloney, Chief Executive, Hospitality & Hope

Edward Pickering, CEO, Citizens Advice County Durham

Katherine Rosati, Founder of the Stockport Women's Networking Group

Lou Calvey, Director, Asylum Matters

Dr Rosie McNee, Director of Public Health and Policy, Feed

Juliet Sanders, CEO, Feeding Families

Katrina Morley, CEO, Tees Valley Education

Denise Irving, Chief Officer, Citizens Advice Sunderland

Liz Todd, Professor of Educational Inclusion, Newcastle University

Steph Capewell, Chief Executive, Love, Amelia

Lesleyann Watson, Project Manager, Gateshead Foodbank,

Cllr Mhairi Doyle MBE, Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion, Sefton MBC

Joseph Ellis, Startwell Project Support Worker, Startwell, BCHC NHS Foundation Trust

Sarah Bates, Startwell Team Leader, NHS

Ruth du Plessis, Director of Public Health, St Helens Borough Council

Debbie Watson, Director of Public Health, Warrington Borough Council

Cllr Mhairi Doyle MBE, Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council

Margaret Jones, Director of Public Health, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council

Dr Cordelle Ofori (FFPH), Director of Public Health, Manchester City Council

Cllr Patricia Bell, Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Care, Westmorland and Furness Council  
Matthew

Katrina Stephens, Director of Public Health, Westmorland and Furness Council

Professor Matthew Ashton, Lead Director of Public health for Food Active, Director of Public Health for Liverpool City Council

Sarah McNulty, Assistant Executive Director (Public Health) , Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Duncan House, CEO Southampton City Mission, Chair Southampton Anti-Poverty Network

Rebecca O'Connell, Professor of Food, Families and Society, CRIPACC, University of Hertfordshire

Ruth Talbot, Founder, Single Parent Rights

Kate Pickett OBE, Professor of Epidemiology, University of York, and Health Equity North

Elaine Hindal, Chief Executive, British Nutrition Foundation

Sabine Goodwin, Director, Independent Food Aid Network

Stephanie Slater, Founder/Chief Executive, School Food Matter

Jonathan Pauling, Chief Executive, Alexandra Rose Charity

Matthew Keogh, Primary Care Network Dietitian

Eleanor Duignan, Primary Care Network Dietitian, Birmingham Community Healthcare Trust

Lucy Davis, Community Dietitian, Birmingham Community Healthcare

Sinead Walsh, Community Dietitian & Nutrition Support Team Leader, Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

Sue Davies MBE, Head of Consumer Rights and Food Policy, Which?

Paul Brookhouse, Deputy Chair Derby Poverty Commission

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman, Local Government Association Community Wellbeing Board

Carlos Yescas, Coordinator, Food Newcastle

Dr Kate Mukungu, Chief Executive, Riverside Community Health Project

Rose Dunlop, Chair Yorkshire and Humber ADPH Community of Interest on Healthy Weight Food and Nutrition & Interim Director of Public Health, Bradford

Henriikka Tuomi-Jennings, Communities & Inclusion Officer, Stockport MBC

Claire Hamilton, Early Years Lead, Startwell

Billie Lawler, Nourishing Norfolk Network Coordinator, NCF

Kristin Bash, Chair, Food SIG, The Faculty of Public Health

Joanna Lacey, Managing Director, Nourish Food School

Sarah Muckle, The Association of Directors of Public Health Lead for Children and Young People and Director of Public Health for Essex

Wendy Wills, Professor of Food and Public Health, University of Hertfordshire

Rachael Gormley, Chief Executive Officer, World Cancer Research Fund

Sally Etheridge IBCLC, Leicester Mammass

Anna Ferguson, Specialist Midwife, University Hospitals Sussex

Laura Lewis, Sufficiency and Information Officer