

## Addressing inequalities and supporting infant feeding in the UK

### SUMMARY

- Every mother must be free to choose the feeding option which best suits her and her baby. However, currently a lack of adequate support for breastfeeding, unaffordable formula prices and formula marketing practices mean families cannot make a fair and informed choice.
- For those who are unable to or choose not to breastfeed, infant formula is essential for the first 6 months of a baby's life. But formula prices are high and it is unaffordable for many families, forcing parents into [potentially unsafe feeding practices](#).
- Breastfeeding is known to have health benefits for infants and mothers. But the barriers to breastfeeding, including financial insecurity and insufficient support, means [rates in the UK are low, particularly among more disadvantaged groups](#), which could contribute to health inequalities.
- In February 2025, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) made a set of welcome [recommendations](#) aimed at enhancing protections against high formula prices and the inappropriate marketing of formula. The Government have not responded to these recommendations.

### Recommendations for Government:

- Respond to and adopt all eleven of the CMA's recommendations on infant formula.
- Invest in and improve support for breastfeeding.
- Strengthen the Healthy Start scheme.
- Improve parental pay and leave.
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### Introduction

The early years are a critical window in determining a child's long-term health and aiding their development and learning. To achieve the aims of [reducing health inequalities](#), raising the healthiest generation of children and [giving every child the best start in life](#), it is vital this Government ensure that mothers, particularly those facing financial insecurity, receive the support they need to breastfeed, and that families who need or choose to formula feed, can make informed choices and afford what they need.

### Infant formula prices are too high, making it unaffordable for many families.

- [The disproportionate price rises of formula](#) during the cost of living crisis, and [lack of competition on price](#), means first infant formula has become unaffordable for many families.
- Our latest analysis finds the most expensive product costs twice as much (£14.00) as the cheapest products (£6.99). This is despite all first formula sold in the UK having to meet standard nutritional requirements that provide sufficient nutrition for an infant.
- Greater regulation of manufacturers is also needed given that just three companies [control 90% of the UK market](#), therefore significantly influencing prices for parents.
- The [CMA's investigation](#) found that the vulnerable circumstances in which parents are having to choose brands, unclear information and marketing tactics used by formula brands has led to poor outcomes for parents in relation to the choice and the inflated prices they pay for formula.

## Breastfeeding support is inadequate, with rates particularly low among deprived groups.



- Deprivation is shown to have a significant impact on average breastfeeding initiation rates. Mothers from NHS trusts in the most deprived quintile had breastfeeding initiation rates of 71%, compared to 80% in the NHS Trusts in the highest quintile areas.
- Inadequate financial support during the maternity period affects mothers' ability to breastfeed: mothers who returned to or started work for financial reasons were shown to be 14% less likely to breastfeed for at least four months.
- Insufficient investment in midwifery and the health visitor workforce is also having an impact. A Food Foundation commissioned survey finding that 42% of mothers who exclusively breastfed reporting that more support from healthcare professionals would have helped them to breastfeed for longer.
- Strengthening laws and statutory workplace guidance will help to protect and normalise breastfeeding.

## The Healthy Start scheme has great potential to support the health of infants, but needs strengthening

- The Healthy Start scheme provides eligible pregnant women or families with a child under 4 with a weekly payment of £4.25, or £8.50 for a families with a child under one, to spend on healthy foods and infant formula.
- The value of payments has not increased since April 2021 despite substantial food and formula inflation, and has fallen behind the equivalent offer of £5.30 of Best Start Foods in Scotland.
- Restrictive eligibility criteria means many families experiencing poverty do not benefit. The scheme is also only available to families with children under 4 years old, leaving a gap before eligibility for Free School Meals at age 5.
- There is no recent reliable data on coverage, but historical data suggests that approximately a third of eligible households are not claiming Healthy Start. This is due to various factors such as lack of awareness of the scheme and the administrative burden of applying.

## Recommended actions for Government:

### Urgent and low-cost:

- Department for Health and Social Care to implement all 11 of the CMA recommendations on infant formula.

### Further recommendations:

- Improve support for breastfeeding by, investing in the midwifery and health visitor workforce; utilising increased funding for Family Hubs to improve community breastfeeding support; increasing the number of gold Baby Friendly Initiative accredited facilities; strengthening laws and guidance on breastfeeding in public and workplaces. (For a full list see: Breaking down barriers to breastfeeding to support healthy weight in childhood | Food Foundation)
- Increase the value of the Healthy Start scheme weekly payments in line with inflation, ensure the value continues to be index-linked and expand eligibility to all families in receipt of Universal Credit (removing the earnings threshold).
- Improve parental pay and leave, which will in turn support breastfeeding. As a first step, the Government should increase maternity pay to, at a minimum, align with the national living wage

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