

The Healthy Start Scheme: Unlocking its potential to support with family food bills and tackle child food insecurity

POLICY BRIEFING | 18 June 2026

Summary

- The Healthy Start Scheme provides a critical nutritional safety net for low-income families with young children to afford fruit, veg and milk. However, the scheme remains underpowered and is not sufficiently resourced to adequately address the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on very young children.
- Healthy Start is a good investment. New analysis finds that expanding eligibility to all families in receipt of Universal Credit would return £2.36 for every £1 invested.¹ The net benefits to society would be worth £7.7 billion over 10 years as a result of the reductions in food insecurity, increased household disposable income, and wider economic gains.
- The value of Healthy Start payments must be increased with inflation to maximise the benefit for young children. Had this been done, new calculations by the Food Foundation show that the payments would now be worth at least £5.88 per week, 26% higher (£1.23) than the current weekly rate of £4.65. Over the course of a year, that means families are losing out on at least £63.96 worth of fruit, vegetables, and other essentials, rising to £127.92 for families with a child under 1.²
- Rising food prices are hitting lower-income families hardest, and without urgent government action to widen eligibility and increase the scheme's value in line with inflation, more children risk going without the nutritious food essential to their health and development.

Box 1: What is the Healthy Start Scheme?

Healthy Start is a targeted, well-evidenced³ scheme that supports low income families during pregnancy and early childhood to afford healthier food such as fruit, vegetables and milk.

Eligibility for the Healthy Start scheme⁴ requires families with children under 4 to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit and to meet a very restrictive income threshold of £408 per month or less (excluding benefits). Pregnant teenagers also qualify regardless of income.

Weekly payments of £4.65 for pregnant people and children under 4, or £9.30 for babies under 1, support access to essential foods, such as fruit, vegetables, pulses, milk and first infant formula, and free vitamins. It operates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland has an equivalent 'Best Start' scheme.

The scheme is unique in directly saving families money on their food bill, helping them to afford the nutritious food needed to support healthy growth and development for their children and delivering long-term social and economic benefits.

Why the Healthy Start Scheme matters now

Strengthening the Healthy Start scheme presents a key opportunity to support families during an ongoing cost of living crisis and predicted food price rises, while also supporting the Government's ambitions to reduce health inequalities, raise the healthiest generation of children ever, and give every child the best start in life.

Across all households with children, 15.3% (nearly one in six) reported experiencing food insecurity in January 2026 compared with 10.9% of households without children. 24.9% of households with 4 or more children are food insecure.⁵

With the Trussell food bank network providing over 900,000 parcels to children in the last year⁶, it would also contribute to the government's manifesto commitment to 'end mass dependence on emergency food parcels.'

- **Food prices are rising**

Latest data⁷ from the Office of National Statistics shows that food and non-alcoholic drink inflation was 2.2% in the 12 months to May 2026. However, the Food and Drink Federation forecasts⁸ food inflation to rise to 9% by the end of the year due to geopolitical instability, disruption to global energy markets, and rising supply chain costs.

A weekly basket of food now costs⁹ £53.55 for women and £60.26 for men, having risen by 30.7% and 38.5% respectively since April 2022. At its current rate, the standard Healthy Start payment of £4.65 per week covers less than one tenth of the cost of a basic weekly food basket.

- **The healthiest generation commitment is not being met**

The situation for children in lower-income households is getting worse. Food Foundation analysis¹⁰ shows the most deprived fifth of households with children would need to spend 85% of their disposable income to afford the government-recommended healthy diet, up from 70% in 2024. Recent Food Foundation survey data found that over half (53.1%) of food insecure families are cutting back on fruit and 39.9% are cutting back on vegetables, both important sources of nutrients for developing young children¹¹. Healthier foods now cost on average nearly twice as much per calorie as less healthy foods, a gap that is at its widest point for ten years¹².

This is taking a real toll. The first 1,000 days are a critical period for brain development, and poor nutrition during these years is linked to long-term stress, anxiety, behavioural difficulties and lasting impacts on neurodevelopment, undermining children's ability to learn, focus and retain information¹³. Children in the most deprived fifth of the population are around twice as likely to be living with obesity by primary school age, and more than twice as likely to have tooth decay by Year 6, as those in the least deprived fifth of the population¹⁴. Good nutrition is therefore a critical consideration to reduce educational inequalities.

Evidence suggests¹⁵ that policy interventions supporting low-income families can help to reduce food insecurity and improve access to nutritious foods. A 2024 study¹⁶ found that Healthy Start played a vital role in helping families afford healthier food and infant formula, enabling children to access essentials they might otherwise miss out on.

By targeting lower-income families, the Healthy Start scheme can help reduce nutrition-related ill health and overall health inequalities while easing future pressure on health and public services.

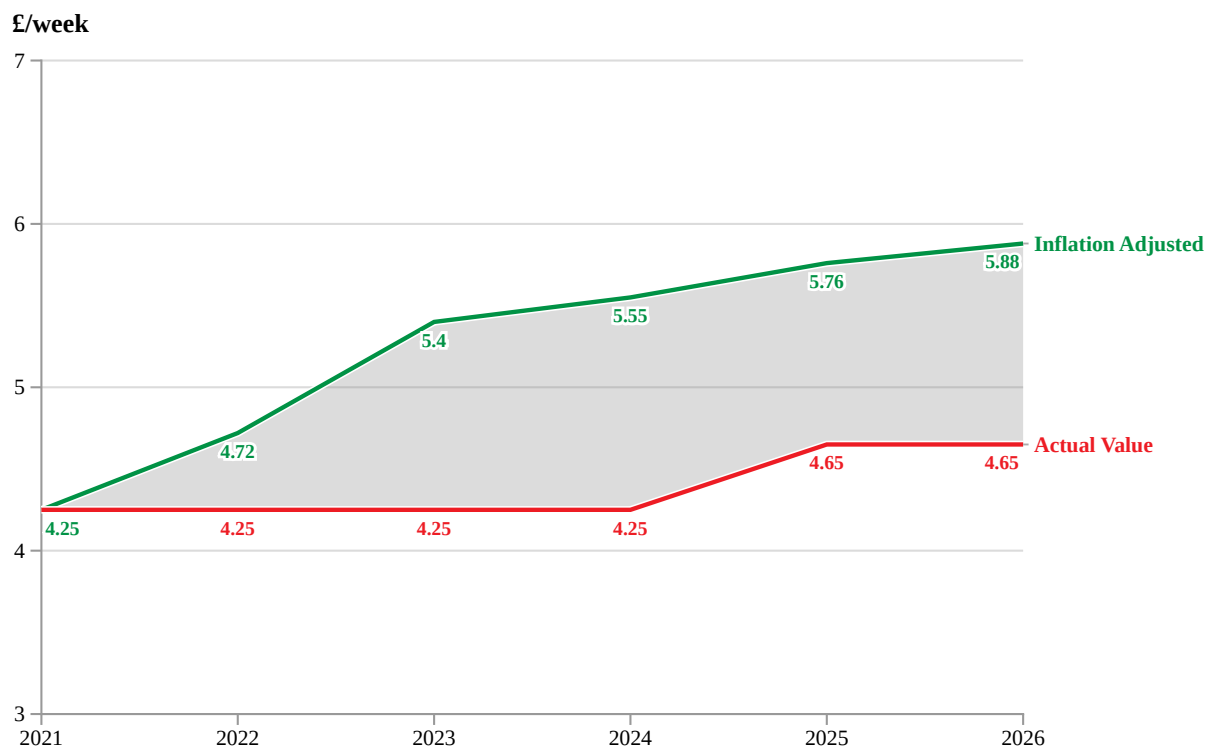
Opportunities to improve the scheme

- **Increase payments in line with inflation**

In April 2026, the value of Healthy Start payments increased by 10%, the first increase since 2021. This is a welcome step, however, with warnings that UK food prices could be 50% higher by November 2026 than they were at the start of the cost-of-living crisis in 2021¹⁷, the real value of the scheme has been significantly eroded, equating to less healthy food on children's plates.

New calculations by the Food Foundation find that, **had payments increased in line with inflation since April 2021, they would now be worth at least £5.88 [see Figure 1], a difference of £1.23 per week.** This equates to £63.96 less money available to families to spend on fruit and vegetables, compared to if the scheme had stayed pace with inflation. For families with a child under one this is even greater, missing out on £2.46 per week, equal to £127.92 over the course of a year.

Figure 1: Increase in value of Healthy Start payments in line with inflation, compared to actual increase in payment values since 2021



Data: ONS, Analysis: The Food Foundation

Without further action to increase the value of the scheme and index it to inflation moving forward, the scheme risks becoming progressively less effective at supporting access to a healthy diet during pregnancy and early childhood.

- **Expand the eligibility criteria to reach more families in poverty**

In May 2026, just 351,921 pregnant people and children under 4 were receiving Healthy Start support¹⁸. Yet approximately 900,000 children under 4 are currently living in poverty, nearly three times more than the number who are in receipt of the scheme, highlighting that a substantial proportion of those most vulnerable to food insecurity may be missing out on vital support¹⁹. The scheme's restrictive eligibility criteria²⁰ and low awareness of the scheme - only 59% of mothers with a baby aged 2-5 months living in the most deprived areas in England are aware of the scheme²¹ - means many families experiencing poverty and food insecurity are not accessing this support despite struggling to afford a healthy diet.

Increasing the eligibility of Healthy Start to all children on Universal Credit, in line with the recent expansion of Free School Meals eligibility, has been shown to be a good investment for public money. New research²² conducted by the University of Birmingham found that **extending eligibility to all families receiving Universal Credit would generate significant social and economic returns, including an estimated £7.7 billion in net benefits over 10 years and a return of £2.36 for every £1 invested**. Benefits to society come from reductions in food insecurity, increased household disposable income, and wider economic gains.

Additionally, the scheme is only available to families with children under 4 years old, leading to a gap for many children between when they stop being eligible for Healthy Start (on their 4th birthday) and later qualifying for Universal Infant Free School Meals (when they start school). It is also not available to children with no recourse to public funds. Closing this gap would help protect children's health and maintain healthy eating habits during the transition into school years.

Recommendations for Government

With ongoing cost of living pressures and food price rises, we urgently call on the Government to safeguard the health of young children by:

- **Increasing the value of Healthy Start payments in line with inflation.** Weekly payments should be increased in line with food inflation. Had this been done, they would now be worth at least £5.88 (£11.76 in the first year). The amount should be reviewed annually to align with up-to-date inflationary changes.
- **Expanding the eligibility criteria to reach more families in poverty.** Expand eligibility to all families in receipt of Universal Credit, in line with the recently announced expansion to Free School Meal entitlement, increase the age threshold to include children aged 4, and extend eligibility to all families with no recourse to public funds who meet income eligibility criteria.

In addition to these urgent asks, the Government should also:

- Contact all potentially eligible households without delay to improve awareness of the scheme and uptake.
- Address problems with data publication and recommence routinely reporting uptake figures. These data are important to incentivise local action to increase the scheme's uptake.
- Implement an auto-enrolment process based on an "opt-out" model rather than requiring families to actively apply.

For further information, please contact Dr Hannah Brinsden, Head of Policy and Advocacy at The Food Foundation: Hannah.Brinsden@FoodFoundation.org.uk

References

¹ Mohtashami Borzadaran, H., and Osifowora, B., and Frew, E., A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Expanding the Healthy Start Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (March 09, 2026). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=6378638> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6378638>

² Calculations by The Food Foundation. Healthy Start inflation figure was calculated by a) re-referencing the CPI index base year from 2015 to 2021, as 2021 coincides with the eve of the cost-of-living crisis that saw record food inflation. b) We then adjusted the Healthy Start voucher value using the CPI index for all food items. This was done by multiplying the 2021 value (£4.25) by (CPI food index year n / CPI food index 2006), where 'year n' represents the year of interest, in this case April 2026. Please contact Food Foundation for further details.

³ For summary of evidence of health and financial benefits of the scheme, see further, The Food Foundation and First Steps Nutrition Trust, 2025, Strengthening the Healthy Start Scheme to protect children's health, available here <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/strengthening-healthy-start-scheme-protect-childrens-health>

⁴ NHS Business Services Authority (accessed 16 June 2026), *Am I eligible for NHS Healthy Start*, available: <https://faq.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/knowledgebase/article/KA-30129/en-us>

⁵ The Food Foundation, 2025, *Food Insecurity Tracking: Round 18*. Available: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking#tabs/Round-18>

⁶ Trussell (2025), End of year food bank stats. Available at: <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/latest-stats/end-of-year-stats>

⁷ Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2026, *Consumer price inflation, UK: April 2026*. Available: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/april2026>

⁸ Food and Drink Federation (FDF), 2026, FDF revises food inflation forecast to at least 9% by the end of 2026. Available: <https://www.fdf.org.uk/fdf/news-media/press-releases/2026/fdf-revises-food-inflation-forecast-to-at-least-9-by-the-end-of-2026/>

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¹³ The Food Foundation, (2025), Boosting early years nutrition to support a healthy childhood. Available at: https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/TFF_Early%20years%20report_2025.pdf

¹⁴ The Food Foundation, (2025), *The Broken Plate 2025*. Available at: https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-04/TFF_The%20Broken%20Plate%202025.pdf

¹⁵ The Food Foundation, 2025, *Roadmap to Reducing Food Insecurity in the UK*. Available: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-10/Roadmap%20to%20Reducing%20Food%20Insecurity%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>

¹⁶ Barrett, M., Spires, M. & Vogel, C. *The Healthy Start scheme in England “is a lifeline for families but many are missing out”: a rapid qualitative analysis*. BMC Med 22, 177 (2024). Available: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-024-03380-5>

¹⁷ Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU), 2026, Food prices set to rise by 50% since start of cost-of-living crisis, new analysis shows. Available: <https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/food-prices-set-to-rise-by-50-since-start-of-cost-of-living-crisis-new-analysis-shows>

¹⁸ NHS, Healthcare professionals. Available: <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthcare-professionals/>

¹⁹ Food Foundation calculations taking the number of children under 4 in Northern Ireland, Wales and England, and the percentage of this population living in relative low income after housing costs see here and here). This latter poverty rate is then adjusted by an uplift factor of 1.71 based on the fact that of all children living in relative poverty in the UK, 48% live in households where the youngest child is 0-4 years old, compared to just 41% of all children. This adjusted poverty rate for under fours is then applied to age group populations of under 4s for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For further details, please contact the Food Foundation.

²⁰ NHS Business Services Authority (accessed 16 June 2026), Am I eligible for NHS Healthy Start, available: <https://faq.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/knowledgebase/article/KA-30129/en-us>

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