Every child deserves a **Healthy Start**

The Food Foundation

CAMPAIGN BRIEFING October 2026

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, Healthy Start was introduced to fill a vital gap by helping families on low incomes afford fruit, vegetables, milk, pulses, infant formula and vitamins during pregnancy and early childhood. It is one of the most effective tools we have for giving babies and young children the healthiest possible start in life at the key moment when the foundations are being laid.

But today while the cost of living crisis has seen unprecedented increases in food prices with worse predicted to come, **750,000 pregnant women and children are missing out on Healthy Start** because the rules are too restrictive: the income eligibility threshold excludes many low-income families on Universal Credit, and support currently stops before a child's 4th birthday leaving pre-school children without help in some of the most critical years for their development.

2026 marks the 20th anniversary since Labour introduced the Healthy Start Scheme, and it's time for them to finish the job.

In their manifesto, Labour committed to tackling child poverty, driving down the cost of essentials, raising the healthiest generation of children ever and ensuring children's circumstances do not determine their opportunities. The Child Poverty Strategy, published last year, recognised that reducing poverty is not only a moral imperative, but an investment in children's life chances, economic growth and more sustainable public services.

More recently, the government has restated its commitment to a "much greater focus all the way through from the start of pregnancy...into those early childhood years", alongside the expansion of Sure Start health services through Family Hubs. Expanding Healthy Start would turn this ambition into reality by ensuring families can afford nutritious food throughout the same critical period. It would complement services such as infant-feeding, maternity and early-years support - turning a commitment to early intervention into direct help with one of the most fundamental building blocks of children's health and development.

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Introduction, continued

The renewed focus on pregnancy and early childhood creates a clear opportunity for government to close the gap in food support. Without investment in Healthy Start, many of the families expected to benefit from stronger early years services will still be unable to afford the nutritious food those services recommend.

The recent removal of the income threshold for Free School Meals was a huge step forward that means half a million more children are now getting fed better at school. Expanding Healthy Start is the next logical step in delivering on many of Government's ambitions. Babies and pre-school children shouldn't be left behind while their older siblings are supported.

Expanding access to nutritious food would also contribute to wider government priorities. Good nutrition in the early years supports children's development and helps them arrive at school ready to learn and thrive, breaking down barriers to opportunity from the earliest years. By increasing families' spending power for fruit, vegetables and pulses, Healthy Start could also help strengthen demand for British produce and support a more resilient domestic horticulture sector, while contributing to healthier, more sustainable diets.

This pack sets out why Healthy Start eligibility must urgently be extended to all families with children under 5 who are receiving Universal Credit, removing the income threshold and closing the age gap, so that every child can benefit right up until they start school.

Because every child deserves a Healthy Start.

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Summary

- **The rising cost of essentials is preventing children from having the best start in life**
  - **Food is substantially more expensive than five years ago.** Food and non-alcoholic beverage prices are around 39% higher than in August 2021.
  - **Healthy diets are particularly unaffordable for low-income families.** The poorest fifth of households with children would need to spend 85% of their disposable income to afford the Government-recommended diet.
  - **Food insecurity is widespread among families with young children.** One in five households with a child under the age of 4 are experiencing food insecurity.
  - **Dietary inequalities emerge early.** Children in lower-income groups have poorer diets, particularly when it comes to fruit and vegetable intake, while inequalities in obesity and dental decay are already evident by the time children start school.

- **Healthy Start must be expanded to close the early years gap in food support**
  - **Healthy Start provides vital nutrition in the earliest years of life.** Research has found that the scheme increases spending on fruit and vegetables and improves the nutritional composition of household shopping helping to prevent dietary inequalities.
  - **But thousands of children are missing out.** Families only qualify if their income after benefits is below a £408 a month and children are only covered up to age 4 leaving 750,000 pregnant women and children on Universal Credit missing out.
  - **Free School Meals have been expanded but babies and toddlers have been left behind.** From September 2026, Free School Meals are available to children in all Universal Credit households, but children in the early years have been left behind.
  - **There is a strong economic case for expansion.** Modelling estimates £2.36 in societal benefits for every £1 invested in extending Healthy Start to all Universal Credit families, delivering substantial value for money.

- **A nutritious start in life has numerous benefits**
  - **Healthier pregnancies and healthier babies:** Better access to nutritious food can help protect against the harmful effects of food insecurity during pregnancy, supporting maternal health and protecting babies long term health.
  - **Better health and development for children:** Good nutrition in the early years supports healthy growth and development, helping to reduce inequalities in obesity, dental decay and other diet-related health outcomes that are already visible by school age.
  - **Supporting school readiness:** Good nutrition and reduced food insecurity in the early years can support children's cognitive development, helping them arrive at school ready to learn and thrive, and breaking down barriers to opportunity from their earliest years
  - **Protecting infant feeding:** Healthy Start helps families feed their babies safely, whether that's by breastfeeding or formula feeding.
  - **Supporting British farmers:** By increasing spending on fruit, vegetables and pulses, Healthy Start can help strengthen demand for healthy foods and create opportunities for British growers.
  - **Making diets more sustainable:** Increasing access to fruit, vegetables and pulses can support healthier, more sustainable diets while contributing to wider environmental goals.

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How to support the campaign

Support on social media by liking and sharing our video:

LinkedIn
Instagram
Bluesky
X
TikTok
YouTube
Facebook

Campaign ask

As organisations working to support children - including charities, academics, health bodies, education bodies, industry, local authorities and other experts - we are joining together to ***call on Government to expand the Healthy Start scheme to all pregnant women and children under five on Universal Credit*** *so that every child gets the Healthy Start in life that they deserve.*

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Case Study: Food Ambassador Barbara Achingale, Middlesborough

"I'm a proud mother of two daughters - aged 3 and 6. I live in the North East of England and I am passionate about speaking from experience and on behalf of other parents who are quietly facing the same struggles.

"Feeding young children should be a joyful and nourishing part of family life, but for me, it has often been filled with worry and stress. Despite working hard, me and my husband often find ourselves having to make impossible choices between bills, food, and other basic needs.

"Accessing healthy food for my girls has been difficult. Fresh fruit, vegetables, baby formula and so many other things, as they are expensive. And when you're trying to stretch every pound, healthy choices are often the first thing to go.

"The Healthy Start scheme gave us a small bit of relief and I am so grateful. I was able to buy baby formula, which is so expensive, as well as some additional nutritious food such as fish. These are things I would have struggled to buy without it.

"It's a wonderful initiative that I discovered through my friend. Although I wasn't aware for a while, even though I was eligible, when I found out it made a real difference, even though it's just for one child. At least I could buy some fruit or milk without having to give up something else.

"But then, without warning, we were told we are no longer qualified, simply because my husband's income was just above the threshold. Suddenly, we were cut off. It felt like a rug had been pulled from under us. We were just getting by with that extra help and now, we're back to square one.

"Things need to change. The Healthy Start scheme is a lifeline for families like mine and more families need to be included, especially those on Universal Credit or with no recourse to public funds.

"Good nutrition costs money. Healthy food isn't always accessible or affordable, especially when you're already stretched thin. That's why the Healthy Start scheme is so important. It gives parents like me a small but meaningful tool to feed our children better.

"It's not right that young children are missing out on the nutrition they need simply because of technicalities or tight limits. Early childhood is such a crucial time for growth and development. What they eat now can shape their health for the rest of their lives.

"We need to ensure that all children, no matter where they live or how much their parents earn, have access to the food they need to thrive."

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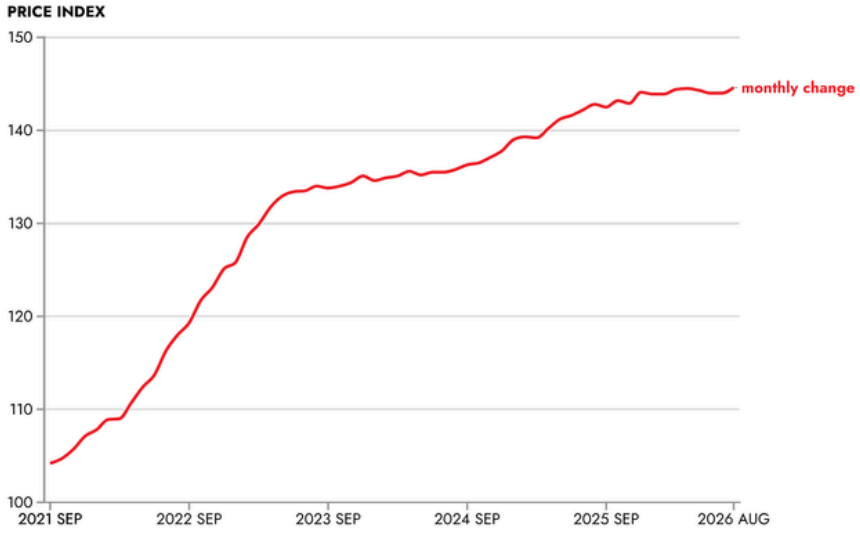
1 The rising cost of essentials is preventing children having the best start in life

Food is substantially more expensive than five years ago

- Food prices have increased by 39% in the past 5 years.
- Ongoing geopolitical and climate related impacts are predicted to cause food prices to continue rising.

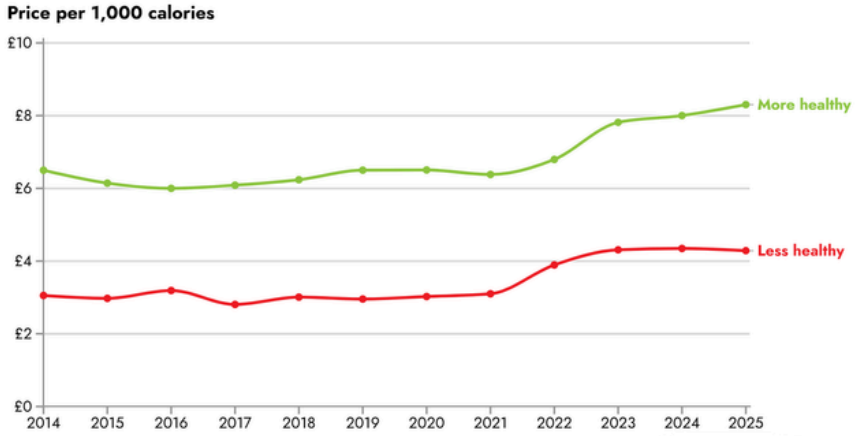
CPI Index: Food and non-alcoholic beverages since 2025



Healthy diets are particularly unaffordable for low-income families

- The lowest-income fifth of households with children would need to spend 85% of their disposable income to afford the government's own recommended healthy diet,
- Healthier food remains twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy food.

Average price of food and drink
by Nutrient Profile Modelling score category



Source: Institute of Metabolic Science Epidemiology (University of Cambridge)., NPM · Cost per kilocalories (1,000 calories).

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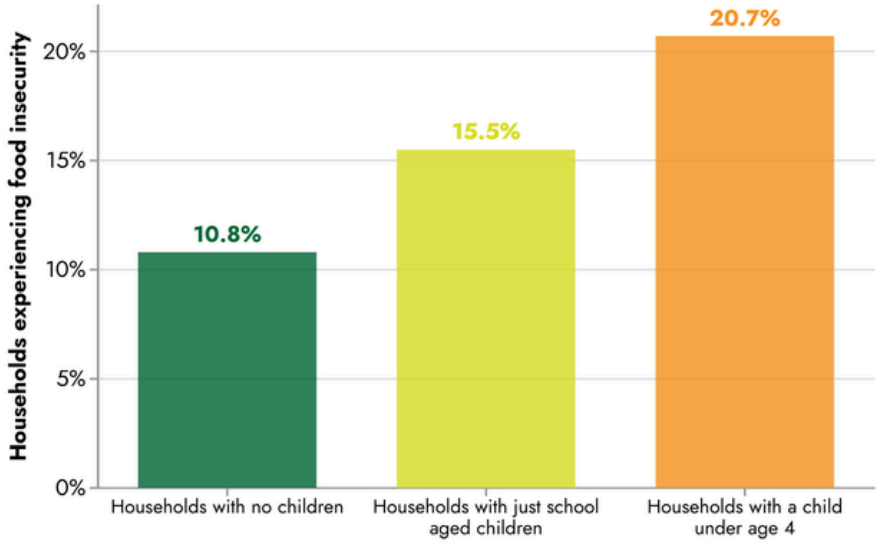
Food insecurity is concerningly widespread among families with young children

- 21% of households with a child under the age of 4 are experiencing food insecurity, compared to 11% of households with no children.
- Around 1 in 3 households (36%) with a child under 5 are living in poverty.
- Nearly two in five expectant and new mothers eat smaller meals or skip meals because of cost, and almost a quarter go without food entirely to prioritise their children

Food insecurity levels by age group



Dietary inequalities are starkly evident early in life

Food insecurity is not simply about having enough calories. It also affects the quality and nutritional value of the food families are able to afford, with children from lower-income households more likely to miss out on foods that support healthy growth and development.

- **Fruit and vegetables:** Children under 5 are eating just 1.5 portions of vegetables and 2-2.5 portions of fruit each day, falling short of the 5 a day recommended minimum. Children from the most deprived households are getting even less, consuming around a third less fruit and a fifth less vegetables than those from the least deprived households, highlighting how dietary inequalities take root from the earliest years.
- **Beans:** Children aged 1–18 years old eat just 11.7g of pulses a day on average, with lower consumption among children in the lowest-income households. Increasing this to just one portion a day (80g) is associated with higher intakes of fibre, folate, iron and zinc, supporting healthy growth and development.
- **Fibre:** 78% of children aged 1.5-3 years old are not meeting the recommended daily fibre intake putting them at risk of missing out on an essential nutrient that supports healthy digestion and helps protect against obesity, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

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Case Study: Samrah, Newham

"My name is Samrah, and I am a mother of three children living in Newham. My youngest child is 15 months old.

"I am very grateful for the Healthy Start scheme and the support it provides to families on low incomes. While I have not been eligible for the full range of benefits, I have personally benefited from the free vitamin supplements available through the programme. During my pregnancy and throughout my baby's first year, I regularly collected vitamin supplements for myself. I continue to receive multivitamins for my baby, which play an important role in supporting healthy growth and development during these crucial early years.

"Unfortunately, because my family's immigration application is still being processed, we do not meet the current eligibility criteria for Healthy Start food support. This means that despite experiencing many of the same financial challenges faced by other low-income families, we are unable to access assistance with purchasing healthy food.

"Even so, I have seen the positive impact Healthy Start can have on families. Raising young children during the cost of living crisis can be extremely challenging, and support with nutritious food and vitamins can make a significant difference to both a child's wellbeing and a family's finances. Programmes like Healthy Start help give children the best possible start in life.

"I have also noticed that many eligible parents are unaware of the scheme or unsure how to apply. Increasing awareness is essential so that more families can benefit from the support available. I believe Healthy Start is a valuable programme, and expanding eligibility would ensure that more vulnerable families, including those with pending immigration status, can access the help they need."

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❷ Healthy Start must be expanded to close the early years gap in food support

What is Healthy Start?

What it is: A weekly payment onto a prepaid card to help low-income families buy healthy food.

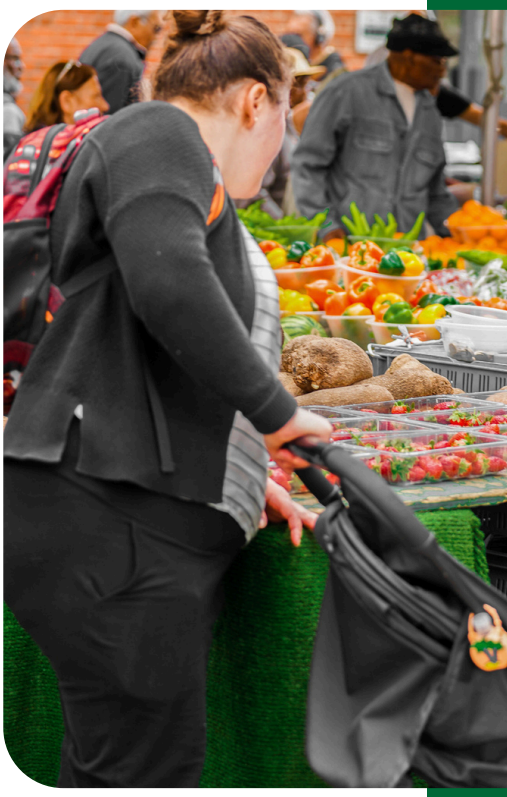
Eligibility criteria: Pregnant women and children under 4 in families on Universal Credit (or another qualifying benefit) earning £408 a month or less, not including benefits. All pregnant under-18s also qualify.

Value: £4.65 per week if you're pregnant or for children aged 1-4 years old. £9.30 per week for a child under 1 year old.

What it can be spent on: Fresh, frozen and tinned fruit and veg, pulses such as beans, cow's milk and first infant formula.

How it works: Once families are registered, they receive a prepaid card that has payments put onto it every 4 weeks.

Where it applies: England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland has an equivalent scheme (Best Start Foods).



Healthy Start provides vital nutrition in the earliest years of life

When household budgets are squeezed, food is often one of the first things families cut back on. Healthy Start ringfences money for fruit, vegetables, milk and pulses at the moment good nutrition matters most, so a family's healthy choices don't depend on what's left at the end of the week.

And it works. An evaluation of the scheme found that it increased household spending on fruit and vegetables and improved the nutritional quality of families' shopping. Crucially, the authors found it was more effective at improving dietary choices than an equivalent cash payment. It does more than put money into families' pockets: it actively helps them afford and buy healthier food.

The early years are a critical time to build a strong relationship with nutritious food. Vegetables are also the most common first food British babies are given (39%). But weaning is trial and error. Babies often reject a new food several times before accepting it, and it can take a dozen or more exposures before a child will eat something new. For families on tight budgets, that repetition carries a real cost: a rejected portion of fruit or vegetables is money wasted, so parents may understandably stop offering a food after one or two refusals. That instinct is entirely rational when money is short, but it works against how children learn to like new foods. Healthy Start absorbs the cost of that trial and error, giving families room to keep offering fruit and vegetables until a taste for it develops. A government survey found that when babies are 8-10 months old, the most common Healthy Start purchases are fruit (72%) and vegetables (69%).

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Healthy Start is a proven, effective way to improve diet quality and to prevent the damaging impacts of food insecurity and poor diet in pregnancy and early childhood on health, school readiness and infant feeding.

But 750,000 pregnant women and children are missing out

Families only qualify for Healthy Start if they are on Universal Credit AND if their earned income is below the £408 monthly threshold leaving 750,000 children and pregnant women missing out.

However, from September 2026, every child in a Universal Credit household in England can get free school meals regardless of monthly income. The government said the change would lift 100,000 children out of poverty, put around £500 back in families' pockets per year, and lead to higher attainment, improved behaviour and better outcomes. But the youngest children are being left behind. Healthy Start's earnings limit of £408 a month, or about £4,900 a year, is even lower than the £7,400 free school meals threshold the government has just scrapped.

And while Free School Meals will support children from the start of school, Healthy Start currently stops on a child's fourth birthday, creating a gap when low-income families still need help to put healthy food on the table.

Extending Healthy Start to all families on Universal Credit, and to four-year-olds, would create one simple rule: if you receive Universal Credit, your children get help with food from pregnancy all the way through school. When Free School Meals were expanded, campaigners pointed out that linking them to Universal Credit is easier for parents to understand and could increase take-up. The could be the same for Healthy Start.

There is also a strong economic case for expansion. Expanding Healthy Start to all families on Universal Credit up to age 5 would cost an estimate £200 million. This is one of the best investments Government can make: for every £1 spent expanding the scheme to all families on Universal Credit, modelling shows there could be a return on investment of £2.36, delivering a £7.7 billion net benefit over ten years as a result of the reductions in food insecurity, increased household disposable income, and wider economic gains. Additionally, investing in children's nutrition during the earliest years can help lay the foundations for lifelong health while reducing the long-term costs of diet-related ill health to the NHS and wider economy. It's proof that supporting families and being fiscally responsible aren't in tension - this is a low-cost policy with an outsized return.

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Case Study: Food Ambassador Penny Walters, Newcastle

"For me, Healthy Start could be a lifeline for families, but it isn't right now. It's needs looking at properly to make sure all those who need it, get it.

"If you're expecting a bairn or already have some little ones, Healthy Start means you get support from day one: it means you can actually buy healthier options. Parents can use their Healthy Start vouchers at the food pantry where I work and for those who are really struggling financially, it makes a difference. Any little bit of pressure taken off helps.

"But, you got families on Universal Credit who don't get it which isn't right.

"Why are they missing out, when things are so expensive? Me and my daughter went from shop to shop to work out where the cheapest infant formula is. £8.99 was the cheapest we could get but my grandson will go through two of those a week. That's a lot of money and that is the cheapest. Not everyone lives near an Aldi or Lidl, not everyone can do the research like we did. In other shops, formula goes up to £15!

"Why don't some people shop in the cheaper places? Sometimes stigma, sometimes they are too hard to get to, sometimes they just don't know about other options. You've got to look at the fact there are supermarket deserts and sometimes the closest one is something like Waitrose, and you've got no other option.

"Healthy food is expensive, and for parents on low incomes or benefits, it's not an option. We don't get to choose. But the Healthy Start allowance gives people that little bit more choice.

"With the expansion of Free School Meals to all households on Universal Credit in England, it just makes sense to extend Healthy Start so these children are supported from the cot all the way through school.

"It's hard to get people to come and speak about this kind of stuff. That's why I do what I do because I'm a little pocket rocket that will shout from the top and say, 'look, this policy is absolute pants; it's not doing what it should do: supporting the people who need it so let's do something about it.'"

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❸ A Nutritious Start in Life Delivers Across Government Priorities

By helping pregnant women and young children afford nutritious food, Healthy Start can contribute directly to the Government's priorities: raising the healthiest generation of children ever, giving every child the best start in life, breaking down barriers to opportunity, supporting families with the cost of essentials and strengthening a more resilient British food system.

Healthier pregnancies and a strong start for babies

By helping mums eat well in pregnancy, Healthy Start can help to protect against the damaging consequences of food insecurity and poor nutrition in pregnancy.

Food insecurity during pregnancy has been linked to antenatal depression, gestational diabetes, anaemia, pregnancy-induced hypertension and unhealthy weight gain. Anaemia in pregnancy is associated with poorer birth outcomes, including premature birth and low birth weight.

Poor maternal nutrition can have consequences beyond pregnancy. Babies born to mothers with a poor-quality diet in pregnancy face a greater risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease in later life, as well as poorer cognitive and emotional development.

This makes pregnancy an important point for early intervention: helping families afford nutritious food like fruit, vegetables and beans before a baby is born can support the health of both mother and child from the very beginning.

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Preventing ill health and narrowing inequalities from the earliest years

The negative impacts of food insecurity and poor diets begin in the earliest years of life, with stark inequalities already evident by school age:

- **Obesity:** Reception-aged children in the most deprived group are nearly twice as likely to be living with obesity as those in the least deprived.
- **Dental decay:** More than one in five five-year-olds in England have tooth decay, rising to almost one in three (32.2%) in the most deprived areas - more than double the rate in the least deprived.
- **Height:** Short stature is more common among five-year-olds living in the most deprived areas, with children from the most deprived backgrounds also less likely to catch up in height by age 10.

However, these inequalities are not inevitable. The first years of a child's life are a critical window for growth and development, and ensuring families can access help with the cost of healthy food through pregnancy and the early years would help families build healthier diets at a time when children are growing rapidly, and before inequalities in health and development become more entrenched.

This is precisely the shift from sickness to prevention set out in the Government's health ambitions. Supporting families to access nutritious food in the earliest years can improve outcomes and deliver better value than concentrating resources later, after poor diet and food insecurity have contributed to avoidable ill health and wider disadvantage.

Case Study: Sandra, London, parent of 3

"Using my Healthy Start card is probably the only time I feel comfortable buying food, where I don't feel like I'm out of budget. The rest of the time, I always feel like I'm going into pockets that I don't have. Healthy, sustainable food should be accessible to all, but we seem to be so far away from that in the UK.

"Ultimately Healthy Start is a small amount of money that goes towards people with hardly any income being able to access healthy foods, but only those who have the littlest can access it.

"People on universal credit are already struggling as it is. Most people have completely unsustainable budgets, and healthy start offers that tiny bit of relief, so that they can access healthy food."

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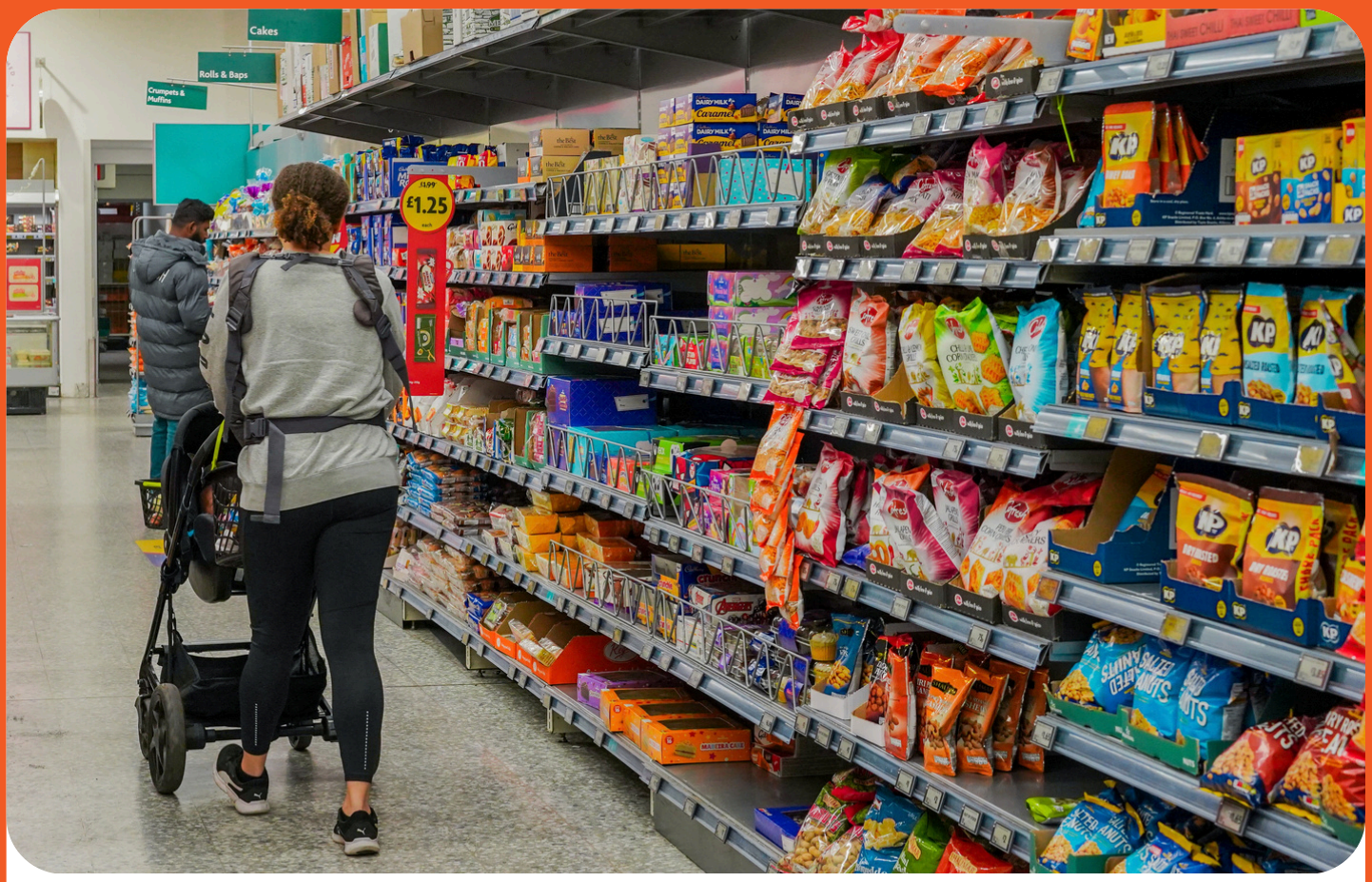

Infant feeding

Healthy Start supports both breastfeeding and formula feeding families by reducing pressure on household budgets.

Food insecurity can be a barrier for breastfeeding. Mothers in food-insecure households intend to breastfeed at similar rates to other mothers but their babies are 2.6 times less likely to be exclusively breastfed. Many of these mothers worry that their own poor diet is affecting their milk and thus reduce or stop breastfeeding altogether. Seven in ten mothers who stop by 4-6 months say they would have liked to continue.

A breastfeeding mother can spend her Healthy Start payment on fruit, vegetables and milk for herself, which helps her eat well while she feeds her baby. The scheme also provides free vitamins to support her nutritional needs during pregnancy and breastfeeding, helping to protect her health during this critical period. By easing financial pressure at a point when cost worries are known to shape feeding decisions, Healthy Start helps families feed their babies safely and in the way they intended, whether by breast or formula.

For parents who need to or choose to formula feed their babies, it is essential it is affordable for them to do this safely. 26% of mothers using formula struggle to afford it, and to cope one in ten wean before six months and one in ten skip meals themselves. A 2026 study of parents struggling with formula costs found that nearly four in ten had used potentially unsafe practices to make formula last longer, such as watering down feeds, reusing leftover milk or spacing out feeds. Healthy Start helps protect babies from these risks.

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Supporting school readiness and breaking down barriers to opportunity

The first 1,000 days are a critical window for brain development, and poor nutrition in the early years is associated with higher stress, anxiety and behavioural difficulties, and with lasting effects on neurodevelopment. All of these can make it harder for children to concentrate and learn, and the effects can be seen years later. In a study of more than 2,000 children, those with a better diet at age one scored higher in maths, reading, writing and spelling at ages 10 and 12. Eating more fruit and dairy, the foods Healthy Start helps families buy, was linked to higher scores.

Food insecurity itself also takes a toll. Children in food-insecure households are more likely to have lower reading and maths scores, poorer attendance and behavioural difficulties. This happens both through poor diet and through the stress that food insecurity places on families. Even moving in and out of food insecurity can have a lasting effect on children's development.

This matters because around a third of children in Britain were not school ready in 2022/23, and those children are far more likely to be persistently absent from school later on. Adequate nutrition is one part of the foundation children need to arrive at school ready to learn. Reducing food insecurity before children reach school can therefore complement other early-years interventions aimed at improving development and school readiness.

Case Study: Rebecca, Devon

"The Healthy Start scheme would mean so much to our family. We are currently receiving Universal Credit and, like many families, are doing our best to manage our finances and make sure we can provide everything our family needs. Unfortunately, we don't currently qualify for the Healthy Start scheme, but the cost of basic food can still be a real struggle for us.

"Having this extra support would take some of the financial pressure off and help us afford essential foods such as fruit and vegetables, milk and other nutritious items. It may seem like a small amount of help, but for our family it would make a genuine difference. We would be incredibly grateful if the Healthy Start scheme could be made available for all families receiving Universal Credit."

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Woodland Farm by Phoebe Davies for Culture Roots Collective 2026

Increasing demand for British produce

The UK is less self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables than in any other food group, growing just 14–17% of the fruit and 55% of the vegetables we eat. This leaves our food supply and prices exposed to climate and geopolitical shocks in countries we rely on for imports. Growing more fruit and vegetables in the UK is both possible and economically valuable: replacing half of what we import but could grow would generate £1.9 billion for farmers and lift self-sufficiency to 66%, using around 0.3% of UK farmed land. But growers need confidence that there will be a market for what they produce.

While Healthy Start will not single handedly deliver this change to UK horticulture, it can be one of several policies to help create greater demand for British produce. The horticulture sector's own strategy documents identify government spending power as a lever for creating more stable demand for growers. By ringfencing funds for fruit, vegetables and pulses, and helping to shape long term eating habits, Healthy Start can be part of efforts to strengthen demand for the UK-grown produce needed to build a more resilient domestic horticulture sector.

Supporting shifts towards more sustainable diets

Research modelling different pathways to meeting the UK's 5-a-day recommendation found that increasing fruit and vegetable consumption could reduce dietary greenhouse-gas emissions by 6.1–12.2 million tonnes of CO_2e a year. Government analysis also found that people with intermediate-to-high adherence to the Eatwell Guide have dietary greenhouse-gas footprints around 30% lower than those with very low adherence, demonstrating the potential for increased consumption of these foods to deliver environmental as well as health benefits.

Healthy Start is one of several important levers the government can use to help shifts towards more sustainable diets by increasing the number of households with dedicated support to spend on fruit, vegetables and pulses.

Childhood is when dietary habits and food preferences take shape. Evidence shows that repeated exposure to fruit and vegetables can increase children's acceptance of these foods, while systematic reviews find that dietary behaviours established in childhood tend to track into adulthood and that early dietary trajectories are associated with health outcomes later in life. Helping families afford fruit and vegetables therefore supports children's diets in the short-term as their bodies grow, while also establishing healthier habits over the longer term.

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Supporting local food systems and access to healthy food

Healthy Start can also complement local food systems and add value to the Government's Good Food Neighbourhoods programme by addressing related barriers to healthy eating: local availability and affordability. The Good Food Neighbourhoods programme is investing almost £10 million in 45 of England's most deprived communities to support provision such as community food shops, mobile greengrocers and community kitchens. Separately, expanding Healthy Start would give more families dedicated spending power for fruit, vegetables and pulses at participating retailers. Alongside improvements in local provision, this would help tackle affordability and strengthen demand for healthy food. Together, the programmes could strengthen local food systems and make healthy food more accessible in the communities that need it most.

Evidence from a similar food voucher scheme found that every £1 invested generated an additional £2.11 in local economic activity, through increased income for local traders, additional spending by families and the wider economic benefits of sustaining local businesses. Where local markets and independent retailers accept Healthy Start, families can often buy cheaper fresh produce, including a wider range of culturally appropriate fruit, vegetables and pulses, helping their allowance go further while also supporting local food systems. In Bury, the local food partnership helped market traders register to accept Healthy Start cards, directing more spending towards small businesses. Traders reported more Healthy Start purchases, while local uptake rose from 62% to 72%.

Willowbrook Farm by Phoebe Davies for Culture Roots Collective 2026

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Case Study: Kirstie, Southampton, parent of 4

"My name is Kirstie Mellor and I'm a single mum of four children living in Southampton. I've got two boys aged 8 and 6, my little girl who is 3, and my youngest daughter Kixie, who is 7 months old. I'm raising all four children on my own, and two of my children have additional needs, so life can be pretty full-on! I'm constantly juggling everyone's different needs while trying to make sure they're all happy, healthy and getting everything they need. Like so many other parents, I have to be really careful with money and make every penny count.

"Healthy Start really helps me with the cost of feeding my children and making sure they're getting nutritious food. I mainly use it to buy blue milk and fresh fruit. My son Kaleb is autistic and finds food really difficult, especially when it comes to trying different things. He won't touch vegetables, but he does enjoy fruit, so I try to switch up the fruit I buy each time to give him some variety and make sure he's getting something healthy into him. I still buy plenty of vegetables for my other children, too, so I can offer them a good range of foods.

"I've also recently finished making batches of homemade purées and filling my freezer with weaning cubes for baby Kixie, who's now 7 months old and absolutely loves them! Being able to buy fresh fruit and vegetables helps me give her a good start with her weaning journey.

"As a one-parent household with four children, the cost of food adds up so quickly. Without Healthy Start, things would be even tighter financially. It would mean having less money available for other essentials and having to stretch our budget even further. I already have to plan carefully around everyone's needs, and this support genuinely helps take some of that pressure off. It's not about luxuries; it's about being able to afford the basics and give my children the best start I can.

"I honestly think Healthy Start should be available to all families on Universal Credit who need that support, and it should continue until children are five. Being on a low income doesn't mean you don't want to give your children the best; sometimes it just means you need a little help to do it.

"As a single mum of four, I know how quickly the cost of everyday food adds up. Every child deserves access to healthy, nutritious food, no matter what their family circumstances are. The cost of living affects so many families, and I don't think parents should have to struggle to afford essentials like milk, fruit and vegetables. Children are only little once, and those early years are so important for their growth and development. Extending Healthy Start would make a real difference to families like mine and help more children get the healthy start they deserve."

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