

POSITION STATEMENT: **THE HEALTHY START SCHEME**

KEY MESSAGES

- Adequate nutrition in the early years is essential for a child's growth and development, oral health and maintaining a healthy weight.
- The Healthy Start scheme aims to support pregnant mothers and young families by providing vouchers to buy milk, fruits, vegetables and vitamins.
- Improvements to the uptake, value and eligibility of Healthy Start vouchers would provide a vital nutritional safety net for thousands of families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Overview

The HS scheme (HS) was introduced in 2006 by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), with a stated aim of providing a nutritional safety net and improving access to a healthy diet for low-income families. Research indicates that those living in lower socioeconomic areas are 80% less likely to eat the recommended 5 portions of fruit and vegetables per day [1]. Women more than 10 weeks pregnant and families with children under 4 may be eligible for vouchers to access fresh fruit and vegetables, pulses, cows milk, infant formula milk and free vitamins. HS is a means-tested scheme only available to a very small number of families – those that earn less than £408 per week who can receive; £4.25 per week for each week of a pregnancy (from the 10th week of pregnancy), £8.50 per week for each child aged up to one year old and £4.25 per week for each child between one and four years old.

In 2021-22, the value of the vouchers increased from £3.10 to £4.25 - the first increase in more than a decade. Paper-based vouchers were also replaced by a prepaid MasterCard which is topped up every four weeks. This was introduced in a bid to reduce the stigma associated with the vouchers and improve ease of use [2]. This switch saw 170,000 new families apply for HS, but also presented new barriers, including digital and internet exclusion and the need for existing beneficiaries to re-apply.

However, these recent adjustments have only addressed a few small issues with the scheme and there is still more to do to ensure the benefits of the HS scheme are fully realised.

What does the evidence say?

- Evidence suggests that food subsidy programmes in England, such as HS, provide an important nutritional safety net for pregnant women and young children living on low incomes [2].
- Although the HS Scheme has been in place for 16 years, uptake of the scheme has been decreasing since 2015, currently averaging at 63%. This equates to over 2 million eligible families missing out [3].
- The estimated loss to families not accessing the scheme across Northern Ireland, Wales and England was almost £70 million in 2021 [4].
- Funding for the scheme has declined to less than a third of what it was a decade ago, a loss of over £90m [5].
- 52,000 existing beneficiaries were unable to re-apply when the scheme switched to digital [3].
- Research in Liverpool found significant gaps in knowledge amongst parents and professionals about the scheme and that the availability of free vitamins was the least well known and least promoted element of the scheme [3].
- Food inflation rose by 14.6% from September 2021-September 2022. Analysis by First Steps Nutrition indicates the value increase from 2021 is no longer sufficient to cover the cost of formula milk [6].

Policy context

The Government has set a national target of 75% uptake by March 2023, however, with the latest figure of just 63% uptake, this target is likely to be missed. Data highlighting uptakes within each local authority was also not published from April 2022 to February 2023.

Part 2 of the National Food Strategy [7] featured recommendations including bringing the eligibility criteria in line with free school meals and extending the scheme by a year to cover children under the age of 5, bridging the gap between the end of HS and introduction of Free School Meals. The government's official response to the recommendations (Food White Paper) failed to take forward any further improvements to the scheme [8].

Some supermarkets have stepped in to play their part in strengthening and promoting the scheme, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis. Digitalisation of the scheme has presented issues in retailers adding value to the vouchers, however Sainsburys have been able to add additional value (of £2 per week) [9]. Iceland are supporting the scheme in other ways, including promoting the scheme on milk bottles [10].

Campaign groups such as the Food Foundation and Sustain are advocating for improvements to the scheme, and in November 2022 the HS Uptake bill received its' first reading in parliament.

The bill would confer powers on government departments and agencies to ensure families eligible for HS are automatically registered, which would address a number of the issues cited in this statement. However, a second reading has yet to take place (correct as of February 2022).

Many local areas are working hard to address the many loopholes of HS. Feeding Liverpool trained 121 new Community HS Champions who are committed to raising awareness of the scheme in foodbanks, community food spaces, children's centres, and housing associations [11]. Better Start Blackpool also ran a communications campaign to raise awareness of the scheme and help local parents access support with applications. This led to a 10% increase in uptake in a 12-month period [12]. Similarly, the DHSC-funded childhood obesity trailblazer programme in Nottinghamshire focussed on improving awareness and uptake of the scheme [13].

Our position and what we will do

- **Policy change:** Continue to campaign for an increase in the value and accessibility of HS vouchers
- **Knowledge share:** Continue to share local best practice with the HS scheme across the Food Active network, through guest blogs, podcasts and at meetings
- **Campaigns:** Promote the HS Scheme through our early years 'Kind to Teeth' campaign, and other relevant resources

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increasing the value of the vouchers in line with current inflation rates, and review every 6 months and bring eligibility criteria in line with free school meals, which is £20,000 annual household income (before benefits)
- Extend the scheme by a year to bridge the gap between HS and Free School Meal provision
- Introduce a system of auto-enrolment of the HS scheme - a shift from an "opt in" to an "opt out" registration system through an automated process would remove barriers families face when applying online

References

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