

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0EU

10 March 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

Urgent action needed on Healthy Start scheme

The rising cost of living is adding more pressure to families in the UK already struggling to afford and access an adequate diet. On average, each month, 8% of households did not have enough money for food over the financial year 2019-20 according to the Government's UK Food Security Report¹. Food insecurity levels in households with children remain extremely high. According to data from the Food Foundation², over 2.5 million children live in households that have experienced food insecurity in the past six months.

Against this backdrop, the Healthy Start scheme plays a vital role in supporting low-income young families and pregnant mothers to eat well. However, we are extremely concerned about the roll-out of the digitisation of the scheme. We have raised our concerns repeatedly with officials at the NHS Business Services and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) but the problems have not been rectified and time is running out before paper vouchers are removed from circulation on 31 March 2022.

Frontline health agencies, charities and retailers have been working tirelessly to help increase uptake of Healthy Start and we have seen uptake rise by 10 per centage points since September 2021. However, the poor handling of the scheme's digital roll-out risks dismantling this success and cutting off low-income families' access to a vital benefit they are entitled to.

We have had numerous reports of issues with the roll-out which we capture below and ask for your immediate attention.

Faulty online application system

Since digitisation began in October 2021, eligible families, health professionals and local community groups from England, Wales and Northern Ireland have reported that the online application process is rejecting many eligible individuals.

Furthermore, many users are experiencing issues in activating and using the card and with accessing balance information. Users contacting the Healthy Start customer service centre have experienced lengthy waiting times (up to 120 minutes) and are being cut-off in some cases. Additionally, users not on payment plans are being charged up to 55p a minute for their calls. Based on the NHS call charges³, we calculate this charge could range from £36 to £66 for a 120-minute wait. A single call at that rate would quickly exceed a low-income family's meal budget for the entire week. Users of a low-income welfare scheme should not be charged to access this support.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1041623/United_Kingdom_Food_Security_Report_2021_16dec2021b.pdf

² <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

³ <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/contact-us/call-charges-and-phone-numbers>

The technical support available to individuals and health professionals is wholly inadequate and, as a result, many public health teams, local authorities and community groups are delaying plans to promote the scheme locally for fear of eligible residents being put off by the faulty system.

We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:

- **Immediately investigate and resolve the technical errors being reported by health professionals and users**
- **Host a webinar for health professionals and community groups to update them on action being taken to resolve these issues**
- **Continue the paper vouchers beyond March 2022 until the application issues are resolved, so no families miss out on weekly payments**
- **Move the Healthy Start call lines to free 0800 numbers, similar to Universal Credit call lines**
- **Urgently invest in additional capacity for the support centre to reduce waiting times and ensure users are well-supported during this transition period.**

Limited functionality of the card for in-store and online payments

While the digital card should offer a number of advantages compared to the paper vouchers, including reducing any stigma, the functionality of the card is causing serious issues for both users, food businesses and retailers.

Firstly, the card does not allow for part payments. Users are reporting having to separate out their Healthy Start items at the checkout and pay for these separately, generating stigma and too many instances of shopping baskets being declined at the checkout. This is causing delays in payments, longer waits for other customers and stress, embarrassment and stigma for users who we fear may stop using the card as a result.

Secondly, the cards cannot be used to make online payments, despite this being possible with Scotland's equivalent Best Start scheme. As a result, small business, local enterprises and online-only retailers (who are developing novel models to support Healthy Start users) are being excluded from the scheme.

We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:

- **Allow the Healthy Start card to be used to part-pay for full shops to reduce barriers and stigma for users and reduce instances of cards being declined at checkouts**
- **Enable online payments using Healthy Start so that users can access online retailers, as well as local social enterprises and services that provide healthy and sustainable food for low-income families in their community.**

Lack of promotion and awareness amongst users and retailers

Analysis of NHS BSA's uptake data for England alone shows 46% of eligible families were not registered for the scheme in 2021, missing out on an estimated £63,537,601 of voucher payments across the whole year.⁴

If this scheme is to tackle health inequalities as intended, it needs effective, national promotion. With concerns about the new scheme putting local promotional plans on hold, and a cost-of-living crisis pulling more people into poverty, more must be done to make sure eligible families are benefitting from the scheme.

⁴ Calculated from Healthy Start uptake data available at: <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthcare-professionals/>

We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:

- **Commit to a £5 million promotional campaign, as recommended in the National Food Strategy⁵, which targets eligible families and the healthcare professionals who work with them, and retailers**
- **Publish regular uptake data combining both the paper and digital scheme so local authorities and community groups can understand uptake in their areas and target promotion where needed.**

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 low-income families access better diets. Evidence shows that women registered for the scheme report that Healthy Start made them think more about their health and diet and led to better dietary choices.⁶

We believe the digitisation of Healthy Start can help to reduce access barriers if managed properly and with a clear understanding of the circumstances of those it is targeting. However, without urgent action, hundreds of thousands of families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland are at risk of losing the nutritional safety net provided by Healthy Start.

Finally, we ask you to extend the scheme to all families in receipt of Universal Credit, rather than limit to those with an income of £408 a month or less. This would support the Government's levelling up agenda and help even more families to secure a healthy start whilst food prices continue to soar.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss our proposals with you as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain



Anna Taylor, Executive Director, Food Foundation



Dr Jyotsna Vohra, Director for Policy and Public Affairs, Royal Society for Public Health

Alison Morton, Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting

Gill Walton, CEO, The Royal College of Midwives

Clare Livingstone, Professional Policy Advisor, The Royal College of Midwives

⁵ <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Recommendations-in-Full.pdf>

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Sandra Tyrrell, Wales Policy Officer, British Dietetic Association

Dr Doug Simkiss, Chair, British Association for Community Child Health (BACCH)

Eddie Crouch, Chair, British Dental Association

Dr Toni Wolff, British Academy of Childhood Disability

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Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor of London for Communities and Social Justice

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Sally Cartwright, Director of Public Health, Luton Borough Council

Dr Rupert Suckling, Director of Public Health, Doncaster Council

Ivan Browne, Director of Public Health, Leicester City Council

Julia Burrows, Director of Public Health, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Kirsten Watters, Director of Public Health, Camden Council

Ian Ashworth, Director of Public Health, Cheshire West and Chester Council

Victoria Eaton, Director of Public Health, Leeds City Council

Matthew Ashton, Director of Public Health, Liverpool City Council

Jonathan O'Sullivan, Director of Public Health, Islington Council

Steve Reddy, Director of Children's Services, Liverpool City Council

Melisa Campbell, Consultant in Public Health - children and young people, Liverpool City Council

Councillor Frazer Lake, Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health, Liverpool City Council

Councillor Michelline Safi Ngongo, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families, Islington Council

Councillor Tracey Rawlins, Chair of Manchester Food Board

Councillor Nurullah Turan, Executive Member for Health and Social Care, Islington Council

Penny Kenway, Director of Early Intervention and Prevention, Islington Council

Cate Duffy, Corporate Director, Islington Council

Laura Quinn, Public Health Improvement Coordinator, Doncaster Council

Jane Hynes, Public Health Programme Manager, Trafford Council

Tina Henry, Deputy Director of Public Health, Devon County Council

Harriet Kretowicz, Advanced Public Health Practitioner, Devon County Council

Margaret Fairbairn, Public Health Development and Commissioning Manager, Bath & North East Somerset Council

Councillor Jim Dickson, Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care and Chair of Lambeth Health and Wellbeing Board, Lambeth

Councillor Ed Davie, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Lambeth

Claire Pritchard, CEO of Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency, Chair of the Good Food in Greenwich Partnership, Chair of the London Food Board

Lauren Neill, Health Improvement Officer, London Borough of Barnet Public Health Team-Children and Young People

Martha Earley, Corporate Head of Public Health Services and Chair of the Good Food Strategic Group, Royal Borough of Kingston

Kathy Lee, Senior Officer, Birmingham Public Health

Councillor Sarah Ruiz, Cabinet Member for Education and Children Social Care, London Borough of Newham

Mathilde Kerr, Health Improvement Officer, Public Health Team, Harrow Council

Andrea Lagos, Public Health Strategist for Children and Young People, Public Health Team, Harrow Council

Shelley Powell, Dietetic Professional Manager, Public Health, Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board

Councillor Louise Gittins, Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council

Councillor Eamonn O'Brien, Leader of Bury Council

Claire Flint, Team Manager, Benefits (Community), Flintshire County Council

Stephanie Ellis, Chair of the West Cheshire Food Partnership; Cheshire West Voluntary Action/Welcome Network

Andy Gold, Head of Food Strategy, London Borough of Newham

Professor Russell Viner CBE, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health

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Dr Anu Raykundalia MA MB BChir MSc FRCPCH, Consultant Paediatrician

Dr Sanjay Patel, Consultant in Paediatric Infectious Diseases and Immunology, Southampton Children's Hospital; Project Lead, Healthier Together: Improving the quality of care for children and young people in Wessex; Clinical lead for Children's programme Hampshire & IOW ICS

Charlotte Merrill, Advanced Public Health Practitioner, Office of the Director of Public Health, Plymouth City Council

Dr Kate Pryde, Consultant General Paediatrician, University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust

Mathew Mathai, Consultant Paediatrician, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Dr Mando Watson, Consultant Paediatrician, St Mary's Hospital, Imperial College Healthcare; Associate Medical Director, Central London Community Healthcare; Clinical Lead, Babies, Children & Young People, North West London Integrated Care System; Co-founder, Connecting Care for Children; Theme lead, Integrated Care, Centre for Paediatrics and Child Health, Imperial College, London

Teresa Johnson, Startwell Nutritionist, Birmingham Community Nutrition, Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

Becky Reynolds, Chair of Bath and North East Somerset Fair Food Alliance

Caroline McAleese, Health Improvement Officer: Children's Public Health and Early Help, Bath and North East Somerset Council

Michelle Clegg, Oral Health Lead Practitioner, Bridgewater Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

Rulan Vasani, Network Lead, UK Public Health Network

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Katharine Jenner, Director, Action on Salt and Sugar

Graham MacGregor, Chair, Action on Salt and Sugar

Victoria Williams, Director, Food Matters

Stephanie Slater, Founder/Chief Executive, School Food Matters

James Toop, CEO, Bite Back 2030

Helen Kirrane, Head of Policy, Campaigns, and Mobilisation, Diabetes UK

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Jane Partington, Partnerships Director, The Bread and Butter Thing

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Suzy Russell, Coordinator, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Network UK

Aaron Barbour, CEO, Katherine Low Settlement

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Sam Watts, Chair, Winchester Food Partnership

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Rachel Loopstra, Lecturer in Nutrition, King's College London

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Dr Kerry Ann Brown, Senior Lecturer, College of Life & Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter

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Susan Riley, Chief Officer, Citizens Advice Tameside

Annette James, Co-Leader of Christ Church Toxteth Park Local Pantry, Trustee of both Feeding Liverpool, and Micah Liverpool

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Anna Route, Development Officer, Hull Food Partnership

Hilary Hamer, Chair, Hull Food Partnership

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Ian Rutherford, Chair, Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network

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Charlotte Iddon, Oral Health Improvement Manager Oxfordshire, Community Dental Services CIC

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Liz Jermy, Project Manager, Oswestry and Borders Foodbank

Patsy Davies, Campaigns Coordinator, Manchester Central Foodbank

Freya Lightfoot, Campaigns Coordinator, Manchester Central Foodbank

Dr. Matthew Stallard, Trustee, Manchester Central Foodbank

Sophie Padgett, Food Poverty Alliance Coordinator, Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance

Chris Price, CEO, Pecan (hosts Peckham Pantry and Southwark Foodbank)

Sophie Paterson, Sustainable Food Places Coordinator, Food Plymouth Food Partnership

Debbie Brown, Foodbank Coordinator, Cleobury Mortimer Food Bank

Beth Gadd, Foodbank Coordinator, Cleobury Mortimer Food Bank

Patrick Buck, Foodbank Coordinator, Cleobury Mortimer Food Bank

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Anna Clayton. North Lancashire's FoodFutures Coordinator

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Andrea Basu, Public Health Dietitian, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

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Andrew Yates, Chair of Cornwall Food Access Alliance and Diocese of Truro Social Responsibility Officer

Dr Lucy Jackman, Community Manager, Feeding Bristol

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Dr Nicola Jay MBBS MSc PgDip, Consultant Paediatric Allergist, Sheffield Children's NHS Trust

Monica Negoita, Community Paediatrics Doctor, Leeds Community Healthcare Trust

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Tom Togher, Chair, Salford Food Share Network

Richard Skelton, Chair Middlesbrough Food Partnership

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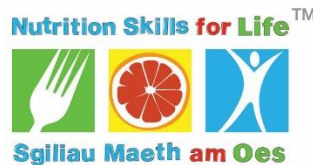
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