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Cc Maggie Throup MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Vaccines and Public Health  
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24 June 2022

**Subject: Prioritise investment in Healthy Start**

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you for the response to our previous letter entitled 'Urgent action needed on Healthy Start scheme' (PO-1397939).

Since our last correspondence, the Government's response to the National Food Strategy overlooked a raft of recommendations in the Independent Review to make improvements to the Healthy Start scheme. At a time when rising food costs are adding ever more pressure to family budgets, failing to prioritise Healthy Start - a highly targeted way to support low-income young families to eat healthily - seems a missed opportunity.

We know household food insecurity is rising at an alarming rate with the number of people affected increasing by 57% between January and April 2022<sup>1</sup>. We therefore ask you to recognise the huge potential of Healthy Start to support these families and prioritise much-needed investment in the scheme in your upcoming Health Disparities White Paper.

Below we set out more detail on these improvements.

**Expand eligibility to more families in need**

The restrictive eligibility of Healthy Start makes it available to a very small number of families – only those with children aged under 4 and with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits. This means many families experiencing food insecurity cannot benefit and why the National Food Strategy (NFS) recommended a less restrictive income threshold. There are children falling through the gap in support between eligibility to Healthy Start and Free School Meals – this can easily be addressed by increasing Healthy Start eligibility to families with children under 5 years old. There is a precedent in Wales where £1 million was included in the Final Budget 2022-2023 to help bridge this gap<sup>2</sup>.

Barriers to accessing the scheme remain for children from households with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). We await your Department's consultation on access to Healthy Start for families with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/press-release/millions-adults-missing-meals-cost-living-crisis-bites>

<sup>2</sup> Final Budget 2022-23 A Budget to build a stronger, fairer and greener Wales, available online at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-03/final-budget-2022-2023-note-v1.pdf>

NRPF which has been promised. The current criteria only permit NRPF families with British children to qualify so that, as of January 2022, only nine out of some 700 applications<sup>3</sup>. Given that Free School Meals have been permanently extended to all children from NRPF families, we see little reason why families applying to Healthy Start should be subject to such punitive restrictions.

**We ask DHSC to:**

- Expand eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits with children under 5 years old as recommended in the NFS
- Immediately bring in the promised consultation on the permanent extension of Healthy Start to all families on NRPF.

**Increasing uptake**

For all families to benefit from this scheme, a concerted effort is needed to increase take-up.

It is encouraging to learn that there were over 107,000 new applications to the scheme during its digitisation<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, uptake continues to be low. During the digitisation process, only beneficiaries previously signed up for paper vouchers have been targeted by Government communications. Much wider promotion of the scheme is needed to reach those who have not yet signed up and remain unaware of the scheme. The NFS recommended the Government launch of a £5 million communications campaign to promote the scheme and we hope to see this commitment in the upcoming Health Disparities White Paper.

The role of retailers should also be harnessed to help the promotion of the scheme. During the pandemic, seven retailers topped up the value of Healthy Start vouchers. The new digital card doesn't allow retailers to add value in this way but some have found alternative means to champion Healthy Start such as Iceland launching a promotion campaign on their milk bottles<sup>5</sup>. This week, we coordinated a meeting between DHSC officials and Sainsbury's who are very eager to continue to add £2 in value to Healthy Start and having funding already set aside to do so. We urge you to work with retailers to remove the barriers to securing this extra support for the scheme.

**We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:**

- Commit to a £5m promotional campaign, as recommended in the NFS which targets eligible families and the healthcare professionals who work with them
- Establish a clear timeline, targets and strategy for increasing the uptake among eligible families
- Publish uptake data online per local authority area and update it regularly
- Organise a retailer roundtable to discuss promotion and ways to top up the value of Healthy Start.

**Increase the value of the payments in line with rising food prices**

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<sup>3</sup> Answer to Written Parliamentary Question by MP Afzal Khan, 10 January 2022

<sup>4</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/government-response-healthy-start-digital-food-scheme-delays>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sustainability.iceland.co.uk/news/iceland-promotes-nhs-healthy-start-and-best-start-foods-on-90-million-milk-bottles-in-industry-first/>

In April 2021, the Government increased the value of Healthy Start from £3.10 to £4.25. However, given the high levels of inflation and rising food prices, there is evidence that the value of the vouchers isn't sufficient to cover the needs of beneficiaries.

According to analysis by First Steps Nutrition Trust, between August 2021 and May 2022, the cost of infant formula has increased, for some products by as much as 14% - more than double the average increase in food prices. The current Healthy Start allowance is not enough to pay for infant formula, with the exception of those households who can access the single 'own-brand' product available (Mamia from Aldi). Families wishing to purchase any other infant formula will have to make up the shortfall in price themselves, which amounts to approximately 50p to £1.50 each week<sup>6</sup>.

**We ask DHSC to:**

- Increase the Healthy Start allowance from £8.50 to £10 a week for infants and from £4.25 to £5 a week for pregnant women and children aged 1-4 years old. This would more realistically support the feeding of formula-dependent infants in economically vulnerable families and protect families' ability to access nutrient-rich foods in the context of increasing food prices.

**Address outstanding digital process issues**

Despite progress in addressing many of the technical issues in the digitisation of Healthy Start, reports of ongoing issues are being raised by frontline healthcare professionals and families. Since our last correspondence, we have continued to receive reports that beneficiaries are experiencing issues with accessing the scheme and there is limited capacity at the support centre to help with their application or using the card. These issues have been reported directly to NHS BSA.

Furthermore, we appreciate that DHSC and NHSBSA have agreed to back pay families who were rejected due to the faulty online application system on the condition of proof that their application was rejected. However, this can be problematic for families that tried to contact the phone line but didn't get through due to long waiting times or those that received rejection messages on screen.

**We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:**

- Swiftly investigate and resolve any remaining technical errors being reported by health professionals and users
- Host regular webinars for health professionals and community groups to update them on action being taken to resolve these issues and uptake of the scheme
- Urgently invest in additional capacity for the support centre and ensure users are well-supported
- Automatically approve back-payments for beneficiaries previously on paper vouchers that have transitioned to digital cards after the last paper vouchers were issued.

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.

Please take the opportunity of the upcoming White Paper to champion your Department's own scheme and make sure it is fit for purpose – by expanding eligibility of the scheme, investing in its

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<sup>6</sup> First Steps Nutrition Trust (2022), What the cost-of-living crisis means for infants and young children and recommended actions, Briefing

promotion, ensuring its value is in line with inflation and fixing the outstanding issues caused by digitisation.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss our proposals with you and a group of beneficiaries who can explain the importance of the scheme as well as the difficulties in accessing it.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain



Anna Taylor, Executive Director, Food Foundation

