



Department
of Health &
Social Care

From Neil O'Brien MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Primary Care and Public Health

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POC- 1430023

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive
Sustain

Anna Taylor, Executive Director
Food Foundation

17 January 2023

Dear Ms Dalmeny and Ms Taylor

Thank you for your letter of 14 December 2022 in relation to the Healthy Start scheme.

I would like to thank you for your continued support for Healthy Start, and I value your feedback on how we can improve the scheme. As you are aware, the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) delivers the Healthy Start scheme on behalf of the Department.

I will take each of the points you raise in turn.

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

We are committed to promoting a healthy diet for children and providing support to families who need it the most through our Healthy Start scheme.

In April 2021, the value of the Healthy Start benefit was raised from £3.10 to £4.25 per week, providing additional support to pregnant women and families on lower incomes to make healthy food choices. Children aged under one receive £8.50 in total per week, a rise from £6.20 per week.

The Healthy Start scheme is kept under continuous review. There are currently no plans to increase the value of the Healthy Start benefit.

Improve communication and data-sharing between DHSC, DWP and local authorities

All parties understand how important the Healthy Start uptake data is and are working to get the data published for the most recent period as quickly as possible. I am delighted that uptake increased from 55% in March 2021 to 72% in March 2022. There have been almost 200,000 successful applications received from households new to NHS Healthy Start, meaning more support is going to families in England, Northern Ireland and Wales for the first time.

My officials continue to work closely with the NHSBSA and the Department for Work and Pensions to obtain ongoing data on the uptake of the Healthy Start scheme. The Department for Work and Pensions have committed to get the data needed to calculate Healthy Start uptake to the NHS Business Services Authority this month. The NHSBSA will then calculate and publish the uptake data.

The NHSBSA continues to work with DWP to find a solution for how best to obtain and publish historical uptake for the months that have been missed.

Address outstanding digitisation issues

Where technical issues are reported by users or healthcare professionals to the NHSBSA, these are investigated fully. The NHSBSA continues to work with stakeholders and users on service improvements to make the user experience as simple as possible. Additional resource was added to the NHSBSA customer contact centre in June 2022. Between July and December 2022, the average waiting time to speak to an advisor was 33 seconds. Following work to better understand the needs of Healthy Start beneficiaries, the NHSBSA set up an automated 24/7 telephone line to support customers with certain queries. Beneficiaries continue to be well supported and there are currently no plans to further increase capacity for the NHS Healthy Start helpline, as performance is now at appropriate levels.

The NHSBSA has engaged with stakeholders on the development of the digitised Healthy Start service throughout the project period. The stakeholder engagement strategy is currently being reviewed and incorporates multiple methods of stakeholder engagement. The NHSBSA recently issued an update to stakeholders which included a survey asking for feedback about the scheme.

Unfortunately, the NHSBSA is not able to make automatic backdated payments without checking an applicant's eligibility. Whilst this may seem onerous, the NHSBSA needs to ensure that only those who are eligible for Healthy Start receive the funds.

Anyone who is struggling with the application process is encouraged to contact the NHSBSA for support. The NHSBSA offers an assisted digital application process through its contact centre for those who need it.

Expand eligibility and increase uptake from more families in need

Eligibility for Healthy Start aligns closely with eligibility for other passported benefits across government and is kept under continuous review. There are currently no plans to change the eligibility for the Healthy Start scheme.

The NHSBSA actively promotes the NHS Healthy Start scheme through its digital channels and has created free tools to help stakeholders promote the scheme at a local level. These include a social media toolkit, editable posters, videos and animations, leaflets including Easy-Read, digital screen designs, banners, guidance documents, materials in other languages and stickers.

The current communications materials are available in multiple languages: English, Urdu, Romanian, Polish, Punjabi, and Bengali. The NHSBSA constantly reviews these materials to ensure that its communications reach those who most need support.

There are currently no plans to host webinars for stakeholders. The NHSBSA issued an update in early January to stakeholders, which included a survey asking for feedback about the scheme. I do hope your organisations will respond to this survey and also help to encourage others to join the NHS Healthy Start mailing list by emailing nhsbsa.communicationsteam@nhs.net so that the NHSBSA can continue to grow their network with stakeholders.

Immediately bring in the promised consultation on the permanent extension of Healthy Start to all families with No Recourse to Public Funds

In relation to the consultation, we are currently considering options and further information will be available in due course.

I hope this reply is helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil O'Brien', with a stylized, flowing script.

NEIL O'BRIEN