

Strengthening the Healthy Start scheme to protect children's health

Summary

- **The Healthy Start scheme helps give children the best start in life** by providing low-income households with a weekly payment to spend on healthy foods and infant formula.
- However, **the scheme is failing to reach its potential**. Restrictive eligibility criteria exclude many families with young children living in poverty; barriers to applying mean that take-up is low across England, Wales and NI; and the value of payments has failed to keep up with food price inflation.
- **Swift action is required to break down the barriers hindering families from providing adequate nutrition to their pre-school children**. This involves improving the effectiveness of the Healthy Start Scheme to guarantee the basic nutritional needs of infants born into low-income families.

What is the Healthy Start scheme?

- The Healthy Start scheme provides a weekly payment of £4.65 (from April 2026) to pregnant people and parents of children under 4 who are in low-income families, as well as to all pregnant people under 18. The value is £9.30 per week for children from birth until their first birthday.
- Payments can be used to purchase fruit, vegetables, pulses, cow's milk and infant formula. The scheme operates in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Scotland operates a separate scheme, Best Start Foods.
- Recipients receive money via a prepaid card that can be used in any retail setting that accepts Mastercard.

Why the scheme is critical for protecting young children's health

Healthy Start provides a vital nutritional safety net to ensure that children growing up in a low-income family have access to healthy food during their early years. Early intervention to address health inequalities is critical:

- Currently, diet-related health inequalities are embedded from children's earliest years, with more than a fifth of children in England living with overweight or

obesity by their first year of school. This is twice as likely among children from the most deprived compared to the least deprived households.

- Poor nutrition in the early years can have life-long health consequences. See The Food Foundation's Early Years series for more information on the importance of nutrition in the early years to life-long health.
- The Food Foundation's latest survey found that 1 in 7 households with children experience food insecurity, compared with 1 in 10 of households without children. Food insecurity seriously impacts on nutrition and health: half of families experiencing food insecurity cut back on vegetables; two-thirds cut back on fruit.
- Healthy Start supports families with the cost of first infant formula – an essential item for babies under 6 months who are not breastfed. Recently, formula prices have been subject to higher rates of inflation than most other food categories. Parents unable to afford formula can be forced into unsafe feeding practices.

Benefits of the Healthy Start scheme

- Evaluations of the Healthy Start found that it improved household nutrition by increasing fruit and vegetable purchases by 15%, increased the proportion of women meeting their recommended nutrient intake and improved dietary choices, including the quantity and range of fruit and vegetables purchased.
- It is also highly valued by beneficiaries, with many reporting a positive impact on household finances.
- Healthy Start can be spent with any retailer that accepts Mastercard and has the potential to boost local economies and support small businesses. Examples include Good Food Retail work with convenience stores and the work of Bury Council to make the market a Healthy Start destination.

Why the Healthy Start scheme needs to be improved

Restrictive eligibility criteria exclude many families living in poverty.

- Eligibility criteria require families to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit and to meet a restrictive income threshold of £408 per month or less (excluding benefits). In December 2025, 354,720 children under four, and pregnant women, were registered for Healthy Start, equating to around 10% of the total population in these groups, while 48% of families where the youngest child is under five live in poverty.
- Children are falling through the gap in support between eligibility for Healthy Start, which ends at age 4 and Free School Meals, which start on entry to school between 4 and 5 years of age.
- British children aged under 4 of parents with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) qualify for Healthy Start if they meet the income criteria. However, this excludes

non-British children. The Government response to a consultation on expanding eligibility to other families with NRPF is now long overdue.

Eligible families are missing out on their entitlement.

- Due to a data issue, the Government has been unable to accurately calculate the uptake percentage for the scheme since January 2023, meaning it is impossible to know how many eligible families are receiving their entitlement. This disincentivises local action to increase uptake.
- Based on historical data, uptake of the scheme is low, with around a third of eligible families missing out, compared to take-up of 84% of the equivalent scheme in Scotland.
- Research shows that barriers to take-up include low awareness of the scheme, fear of authority, stigma, uncertainty about eligibility and administrative hurdles that hinder access.

The value of payments has not kept pace with rapid food price inflation.

- Whilst the recent 10% uplift in value is welcome, this increase does not match inflation and is still less than Best Start in Scotland, which provides £5.40 per week compared to £4.65 for Healthy Start.

Recommendations for Government

If strengthened, the Healthy Start scheme provides a vital tool for achieving the Government's commitments to reduce health inequalities and give every child the best start in life. We urgently recommend the Government:

- **Expand the eligibility criteria to reach more families in need.** Eligibility should include all families on Universal Credit (in line with the recent Free School Meal eligibility expansion); increase the age threshold of children to include children aged 4 to 5 (bridging the gap to Universal Infant Free School Meals); and extend eligibility to all families with no recourse to public funds who meet the standard criteria.
- **Increase uptake to ensure no eligible family misses out:** resolve data issues and start publishing uptake data; immediately write to all eligible families to ensure they are aware of the scheme; and introduce auto-enrolment, with an "opt-out" rather than "opt-in" system.
- **Ensure weekly payments maintain their relative value:** increase payments to reflect inflationary increases in food prices; review the value annually to ensure it is increased in line with inflationary changes; and explore how to facilitate retailers adding further value to the scheme.

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