



Promoting Healthy Start in South Gloucestershire

South Gloucestershire Food Poverty Alliance
May 2020

Exploring health professionals understanding and experiences of Healthy Start

Health professionals, particularly Health Visitors and Community Midwives are key to raising awareness of Healthy Start to families. We held focus groups with community-based health professionals to understand their experiences of supporting families to access the vouchers. These focus groups followed earlier work with eligible families to explore their experiences of the scheme.

The main finding highlighted a lack of awareness and inconsistency of knowledge and understanding on various aspects of the scheme by health professionals.

Despite health professionals conducting generic family assessments, which include questions around their economic circumstances, it was clear that the scheme was only discussed with families if the health professional thought they would be entitled to it.

There was evidence that health professionals have different opinions about the scheme and what it is trying to achieve. In some cases, this has impacted the way the scheme is communicated to families.

We made an assumption that health professionals knew more about the need for vitamins in pregnancy and infancy (in particular vitamin D) than they actually did.

There are clear implications for training of all groups of health professionals to ensure accurate information is cascaded to those eligible for the scheme, including how to communicate the importance of good and appropriate nutrition for pregnant women, babies and infants.

“Some families are reluctant to take vitamins, they think you are making a judgement about their diet.” Health professional

“It’s hard knowing if would meet the criteria. People are not always forthcoming about their circumstances, but it’s not always obvious that they are receiving certain benefits.” Health professional

This activity was assisted by financial support and other advice from Food Power.
www.foodpower.org.uk



New pop up banner stands are now used in libraries, leisure centres, shopping centres, GP surgeries, Children’s Centres, Early Years settings and Job & Advice Centres

Challenges and learning

We learned that planning activities can take much more time than you think. Be able to adapt and be flexible in your approach when talking to families needs to be written into project planning and application for research governance.

We didn't expect it to be so hard to engage with some health professionals to organise focus groups in order to get a better understanding of their perspective. We found that pressures on healthcare professionals limit time for conversations on the importance of good and appropriate nutrition for pregnant woman, babies and young children. We see this is a missed opportunity to discuss Healthy Start within this context. They appear to be seen as two different topics rather being interlinked. Until April 2020, health professionals have had to sign all new applications for Healthy Start confirming that health-related advice has been given to the applicant. This makes one doubt if in reality this is done and if so, what advice was given.

We also learned that there is generally poor understanding of the importance of Vitamin D and the role of supplements by families.

"If I hadn't been told by my friends, I wouldn't have known about it. When the vouchers came through it was like a weight had lifted off my shoulders because at least I could get the milk now so that's fine." Dawnie, single mum of toddler

"I felt really self-conscious the first time I used them but actually the people at the checkout, they must see them enough, nobody really batted an eyelid, it was all absolutely fine." Jen, single mum of 3

"The biggest barrier is just allowing people to know about the scheme. I just think the average person doesn't know about it, never mind those entitled to it. More of us are closer to the poverty line actually than ever before now so, yeah, it would make a huge difference." Nia, mum to a 3 year old

Next steps

We intend to continue working with health and care professionals and partners who give advice and support to residents in South Gloucestershire, including the welfare and benefits team at South Gloucestershire Council, housing associations and debt support and advice agencies, to ensure that Healthy Start is discussed with all eligible families to encourage them to take up and use the vouchers.

Key achievements and impact

- Taking a systematic look at what barriers exist to take up and use of Healthy Start vouchers and vitamins at a local level
- Enabling local parents living on low incomes to have a voice on a national scheme developed to help them access healthy food for their family
- The Healthy Start scheme is now part of a range of advice given by frontline workers to support income maximisation for people living on low incomes
- Our alliance will continue to focus action to address food poverty with Healthy Start uptake being a key performance indicator. With the devastating impact of Covid-19, promotion and take up of this scheme is more important than ever for local families