

# Improving Healthy Start vouchers for health, poverty and UK farmers

## A submission from Sustain to the National Food Strategy call for evidence

The Healthy Start means-tested voucher scheme helps pregnant women and young children buy healthy food. They are worth £3.10 per week, per child or woman. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) should re-invigorate the scheme by 1) increasing the value of the voucher to reflect the rise in food prices over the last 10 years; 2) exploring how this scheme can be better linked with local markets and farmers, such as introducing incentives for buying British; and 3) expanding how the vouchers can be used, e.g. prescribed by GPs for those with health problems as an alternative to drugs; and 4) investing in promotion and training so that local public health teams are properly equipped to ensure all eligible pregnant women and children receive the vouchers; currently 35% of families are missing out on the scheme.

Healthy Start has not been properly reviewed since its inception in 2006. Overhauling it is a key way to deliver on multiple Food Strategy objectives as it has the ability to reduce food insecurity, help develop healthy eating habits with young children and support local market and farm economies.

### What impact would it have?

The value of Healthy Start vouchers has not changed from £3.10 in ten years, despite significant food price rises. The maximum take home pay of a family on Universal Credit cannot exceed £408 per month in order to be eligible for the vouchers, so families receiving these are managing very tight budgets and every additional pound would help. Government should, in the long term, review eligibility criteria under Universal Credit for these vouchers so that it is better aligned with other similar schemes, such as free school meals (£616 per month) and free childcare for two year olds (£1,283 per month).

There is also a significant, as yet untapped, opportunity to better link Healthy Start with British farms and local markets. [The Rose Voucher](#) scheme is an example of how this could work: they offer vouchers that can be used for fresh fruit and vegetables in participating local markets, available to families who qualify for Healthy Start. Key to this success has been supporting market traders with reimbursement for the vouchers (which is very onerous for Healthy Start, but done with an app for Rose Vouchers) and increasing promotion and visibility of the scheme to shoppers.

The scheme could be incentivised so that when shoppers spend their Healthy Start vouchers at certain markets or on certain products, such as British grown fruit and vegetables, then the value is increased or points are awarded (e.g. a voucher worth £3.10 could be worth £5 if spent on British vegetables). In the United States this model has been successful in supporting local farmers and markets, such as [Wholesome Wave SNAP doubling](#) where beneficiaries get double the value when purchasing fresh fruit or vegetables. In Philadelphia, The Food Trust has seen [use of SNAP food stamps increase by 375% at farmers' markets](#) when incentivising purchases (for every \$5 spent, shoppers get \$2 more to spend), with similar success incentivising the purchase of fresh fruit and vegetables in corner shops as well.

If there was 100% take up of Healthy Start, this would mean £84m going back to UK growers. Similar incentives could be used for encouraging purchase of agro-ecological produce to meet the environmental aims of the National Food Strategy.

Healthy Start could also be expanded as ‘healthy food on prescription’ vouchers. GPs could prescribe them to people who are trying to make dietary changes for health reasons (e.g. diabetes or heart disease) and could benefit from financial support or incentives. Again, Wholesome Wave has pioneered this approach with their [Wholesome Rx](#) programme.

Our recently [published toolkit](#) shows how areas such as Aberdeen and Birmingham have trialled campaigns and promotional outreach in order to increase take up of the vouchers, typically pioneered by food alliances and public health teams. However, local areas emphasise the need for a national resource bank of promotional materials so that each area doesn’t need to repeatedly make their own. These need to be available to download online, in multiple languages and editable so they can include local information.

Current plans to digitise the Healthy Start application process and introduce a smartcard are welcome, but without the national government’s simultaneous investment in promotion and training for local health workers and mainstreaming awareness of the scheme into benefit advice services, it is likely we will continue to see a decline in the take up of the vouchers, as has been the trend over the last seven years.

### **What does this need to succeed?**

The government should first deliver the consultation on Healthy Start, as promised by the DHSC in June 2018 in Chapter 2 of the Childhood Obesity Plan. This would allow further input from all stakeholders on how the scheme could be improved.

Currently the scheme falls well short of its 80% take up target – with 66% take up in 2018, last year’s underspend in England and Wales was estimated at £28.6m. This underspend could be used to increase the voucher’s value, invest in promotion and training for local health and advice services, or explore other proposals made here. For example, increasing the value from £3.10 to £4.25, as has been done in Scotland, would cost approximately £20m (NB: the estimated current spend on vouchers is approximately £54 million per year).

The digitisation of Healthy Start is an opportunity to fundamentally change how eligible pregnant women and new parents join the scheme. As DWP knows who’s eligible, they could work with DHSC to simply enrol everyone who is eligible, unless they opt out. This would save time and would mean Healthy Start vouchers, or the smart card, could be part of an educational package about healthy eating, breastfeeding and other important messages around healthy eating at a young age.

**To further discuss the proposals in this submission, please contact Maddie Guerlain**

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### **List of references and links to supporting evidence**

- [Making the most of Healthy Start: A toolkit for local action](#) (Food Power and London Food Link, 2019)
- The Rose Voucher Scheme <https://www.alexandrarose.org.uk/how-it-works>
- Wholesome Rx: Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program <https://www.wholesomewave.org/how-we-work/produce-prescriptions>
- Wholesome Wave: Doubling SNAP <https://www.wholesomewave.org/how-we-work/doubling-snap>
- [Healthy Start: What happened? What next?](#) (First Steps Nutrition Trust 2018)