

# A Healthy Start for all:

How cutting the red tape on Healthy Start will help babies, children and families blossom.

Report by Emma Lewell-Buck MP

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**#HealthyStartForAll**



## Summary

With families on very low incomes struggling to afford essential goods and services, a new frontier in welfare reform is required as a matter of urgency. This report makes the case for opening up that frontier by completing the modernisation of the Healthy Start scheme. In particular, a proactive public policy of automatically identifying and registering all eligible families for the scheme would strengthen this vital part of the nutritional safety-net for those families with babies and young children. It would also begin to turn the tide on food poverty that now blights the lives of all too many families in our country.

## Background

Healthy Start is a UK Government welfare scheme providing a nutritional safety-net to very low-income families through the provision of a prepaid card. It was first launched under a Labour Government in 2006 and is available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) operates the Healthy Start scheme on behalf of the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC).

The scheme is targeted at women more than 10 weeks pregnant or families responsible for at least one child under four years old receiving certain welfare benefits, alongside all women under 18 more than 10 weeks pregnant (regardless of their income). The prepaid card can be used to purchase fresh, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables, grains, plain cow's milk or infant formula. Those in receipt of Healthy Start also have access to free vitamins.

Eligible families are entitled to £4.25 per week from the 10<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy, £8.50 per week for children aged 0 to their first birthday and £4.25 per week for children aged 1 to 4.

Every single child deserves the best start in life, and in those very early years, a nutritious diet is essential for growth and development. A poor diet has a significant impact on a child's health, exposing them to illness and disease, which in turn effects their lifelong quality of health. The longer-term costs to taxpayers is likely to be much greater than the current cost of the scheme in decades of health implications.

The number of children in the UK living in food poverty is a national emergency, nearly doubling since last year to almost 4 million<sup>1</sup>. It's little wonder when food prices have soared by around 30 per cent over the past two years, pushing families to the absolute edge<sup>2</sup>.

All the while, if a mother remains eligible for Healthy Start from 10 weeks into pregnancy until their child is four years old, they will receive around £1,200 in payments. This could be the difference between a young child having a healthy nutritious meal or not.

Yet, currently Healthy Start is beset with problems—problems caused by this Government that can easily be fixed by this Government.

Many necessary reforms could be made to the scheme, including uplifting the value of payments to reflect inflation, adjusting the very low-income threshold for qualification, in line with Free School Meals income threshold, to include more families impacted by poverty and closing the gap between the support provided by Healthy Start and Free School Meals when a child enters reception.

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## A Postcode Lottery

Last year, the Government announced a target to reach 75 per cent uptake by March 2023<sup>3</sup>. However, seven months past the deadline, uptake across England, Wales and Northern Ireland remains low at 70 per cent (as of October 2023)<sup>4</sup>. In comparison to Scotland, their equivalent scheme 'Best Start Foods' was higher last year, with 88 per cent of those eligible claiming support<sup>5</sup>.

The scheme is experiencing a postcode lottery as huge disparities remain between nations and Local Authorities. Uptake in Northern Ireland is 16 percentage points lower than Wales standing at only 58 per cent. When looking at Local Authorities in England, Ipswich is performing well with 83 per cent of residents accessing their eligibility, a substantial difference to Ribble Valley with close to half of those eligible missing out on payments.

NHSBSA relies on stakeholders to promote the scheme locally, this puts promotional costs and manpower onto food banks, community groups, children's centres, councils, and healthcare professionals. In areas with few third sector organisations or where services are already stretched, their focus may not be on promoting Healthy Start.

On the surface, it seems more families are accessing the scheme as uptake across the three nations has increased by 7 percentage points between January and October 2023.

However, the number of those eligible for the scheme is decreasing, which is pushing uptake ratios higher. In those 10 months, there were over 53,000 fewer individuals eligible for the scheme compared to just 4,900 more receiving payments.

The restrictive eligibility criteria makes Healthy Start available to a only very small number of those in need – with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits. This eligibility criteria is stricter than that of Free School Meals.

Therefore, despite uptake figures looking more positive, the reality on the ground is a scheme is becoming more inaccessible.

The Government's former food tsar Henry Dimbleby in his independent National Food Strategy report highlighted the Government's lack of action to increase uptake among eligible families and need to expand eligibility in line with Free School Meals<sup>6</sup>.

## Why are so many families missing out?

In October 2023, over 157,000 babies, young children and pregnant mothers missed out on millions of pounds worth of nutritious food.

The DHSC know which beneficiaries are missing out on their eligibility based on data sharing from the DWP.

From conversations with national charities alongside food banks/projects in South Shields, Washington, Manchester, Liverpool, and Bradford there are several barriers preventing families from applying for Healthy Start.

**Application routes:** There are different routes to apply if under 18 years old, receiving a Legacy Benefit, and for those with the No Recourse to Public Funds. Many families have found this confusing especially with minimal support from Healthy Start helpline operators.

**No access to the internet:** For families unable to apply via the Healthy Start website or email, the helpline is equally inaccessible. The website states applications can be made via the helpline, however when calling the number an automated message states applications should be made online.

**No support with applications:** When applying online, after entering personal details the site will state if a person is eligible or not. It gives no specific reason as to why a person is ineligible. Delays to updates on DWP accounts or first Universal Credit payments can incorrectly state that claimant is ineligible without giving advice to re-apply or call the helpline.

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**Lack of awareness:** Many potential beneficiaries and community organisations simply do not know Healthy Start exists, or how it works. There is no coordinated national campaign by the DHSC/NHSBSA to boost awareness.

**Language barriers:** Potential beneficiaries whom English is not their first language are at particularly at risk due to not have access to appropriate information and publicity.

These barriers are unnecessarily pushing families into financial crisis, with a greater need to access emergency provision, as well as a reduction in access to adequate nutrition.

### **Recommendation**

A swift and effective way to maximise take-up and remove barriers to entitlement is alter the scheme from 'opt-in' to 'opt-out' through auto enrolment.

## **Action Taken to Boost Uptake and Government Response**

In June of this year, the Healthy Start Scheme (Take-Up) Bill was introduced in Parliament to auto enrol the scheme by changing it from an 'opt-in' system to an 'opt-out' one<sup>7</sup>. The Bill received cross-party support from Labour, Conservative, SNP, Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru MPs.

In the same month, a coordinated letter from 41 cross-party MPs and 27 stakeholder organisations was sent to the former Health Secretary again calling for auto-enrolment of Healthy Start<sup>8</sup>. The stakeholder organisations included Feeding Britain, Food Foundation, IFAN, Magic Breakfast, Royal Collage of Midwives, Royal Collage of Paediatrics and Child Health, Sustain and UNICEF UK.

The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change is amongst organisations supporting this type of proactive approach to welfare.

Earlier this month, a coordinated letter from 34 cross-party MPs was sent to the former Health Secretary asking DHSC to urgently contact families missing out on Healthy Start payments<sup>9</sup>.

In response to the proposed Bill and first letter, the DHSC responded claiming that autoenrollment is not possible due to the prepaid card being a financial product and is therefore subject to financial regulations<sup>10</sup>.

However, through coordination with Mastercard as the card payment system operator and Allpay the card issuer, it is clear auto enrolment is possible. A letter from Mastercard stated it "would require the NHS and relevant government departments to provide accurate data on the eligible customers"<sup>11</sup>. As the majority of eligible claimants receive DWP welfare, greater data sharing between the DWP and DHSC could provide accurate information on eligible beneficiaries.

### **Recommendation**

Establish the necessary data sharing between the DWP and DHSC to provide Mastercard and Allpay accurate data on eligible recipients to facilitate autoenrollment.

## Funding

The DHSC are not being transparent on Healthy Start funding. This information has been gathered through written parliamentary questions, letters from former Health Ministers and Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to the Department.

The Department allocates funds each financial year for Healthy Start. The former Health Minister Neil O'Brien confirmed the amount of funds provided to the Department for Healthy Start each year is based on forecasts of the number of families on the scheme<sup>12</sup>. However, the former Minister further stated the forecasts on numbers of beneficiaries and uptake are not available<sup>13</sup>, alongside an FOI response claiming "it is in the public interest to withhold disclosure of the information"<sup>14</sup>.

Funding is a very key question. If the Department has not allocated enough money to Healthy Start, it is not in their best interest to boost uptake by either promoting or auto enrolling the scheme.

For example, the DHSC's budget for Healthy Start in the 2021-22 financial year was £75.8 million<sup>15</sup>. Yet spending on Healthy Start in that financial year was £78.1 million, therefore a £2.3 million overspend<sup>16</sup>. Due to Healthy Start being a statutory scheme, any overspend comes from the Department's overall budget.

### Recommendation

The Chancellor in his 2023 Autumn Budget must allocate the DHSC greater funding to cover Healthy Start payments for all eligible beneficiaries. The DHSC must ring fence this funding to ensure it's being spent on Healthy Start payments.

## Case Studies and Testimonials

Between February 2022 and November 2023, Manchester Central Foodbank have been leading a Healthy Start Scheme awareness-raising and one-to-one support project.



The testimonies include the experiences of existing Healthy Start (HS) claimants, applicants and under 18 applicants<sup>17</sup>.

### Application issues

June 2023

Single mum, 3 children under 4yrs old  
Eligible for healthy start

Repeatedly applied for HS with various professionals and through the HS helpline, however the application was consistently unsuccessful without explanation or resolve. HS advised the mum to speak with the Job Centre, the Job Centre referred her back to HS as it is not a DWP scheme. The mum had multiple conversations with both and is continually passed back and forth between the two.

Mum has now given up applying for HS: *"I'm a single mum - you can see that it's just me and my four children in the household. I'm missing out on so much money."* She is incredibly frustrated and upset.

Mum has/will miss out on £17 per week, an estimated £3,697.50 for her three children under 4, if each received the full entitlement in their respective first 4 years of age.

November 2022

Single mum, 10-year-old and 2-year-old  
Eligible for healthy start

Made a successful application with HS but did not receive the pre-paid card. HS explained that they had entered her details wrong on the system. Weeks pass and the issue remained unresolved despite numerous phone calls and emails to HS. HS eventually told the mum to re-apply.

After 4 months, the Mum finally received a prepaid card and payments were backdated. This entire process was stressful for the Mum and involved unnecessary admin.

August 2023

Mum, 3-month-old twins.  
Likely eligible for healthy start

HS online application continually unsuccessful without resolve from HS.

The household face money worries: *"I go through 1 tub of formula milk every 2-3 days, so I'm buying 3-4 tubs a week which costs around £50-60"*. The Mum further noted how frustrating the digital HS process is compared to the previous paper vouchers that she received for her older children.

Outcome unknown.

### Under 18s

September 2023

Aged 17, pregnant.  
Eligible for healthy start as under 18

Mum initially applied for HS via post at the beginning of pregnancy and again at 26 weeks as she heard nothing back. No resolve or explanation from HS, who repeatedly told Mum that she needs to apply again.

Mum then gave birth and therefore missed out on her entitlement during pregnancy. She applied for HS again after giving birth and eventually received the prepaid card. Payments were not backdated for the time she had missed during her pregnancy.

Mum missed out on £195.50.

September 2023

Mum aged 16, pregnant with twins.  
Eligible for healthy start as under 18

Mum was referred to the Manchester Central food bank aged 16 through a midwife due to repeatedly applying for HS via post but hearing nothing back. She was unable to access the automatic entitlement for under 18s during pregnancy.

Mum had not applied for HS after birth and explained: *"I'm so rushed off my feet with the girls and forget to get things done"*.

Mum missed out on £478.50.

July 2023

Mum aged 16, 9-week-old baby.  
Eligible for healthy start

Attempted to apply via post multiple times when pregnant but heard nothing back from HS.

A HS adviser told mum to fill out another HS application via email, this was done with the help of her parents but again HS did not respond. The family were left incredibly confused and frustrated.

After multiple weeks, Mum got sent her prepaid card without backdated payments for the months missed.

Mum missed out on £340.

Feeding  
Liverpool

## What Health Visitors think

Last year, Feeding Liverpool worked with pregnant women, families, children's centre staff, and health visitors to review the Healthy Start scheme in Liverpool and beyond<sup>18</sup>. These testimonies are from health visitors:

*"A lot of families find it difficult to access the internet or don't have the resources or funds, or internet access, and these are the families who would have brought the paper form with them to the Well Baby Clinics".*

*"A lot of families struggled when it went online."*

*"I do think a lot of people know about Healthy Start but from my experience a lot of families have said 'well I do try to ring them, and I've just given up'".*

The case studies and testimonies highlight that the systematic failings of Healthy Start are only solvable through auto enrolment as any kind of 'opt-in' system requires promotion, English language and digital skills, alongside capacity from already stretched third sector organisations, councils and health services.

## Next Steps

As this report is published, there will be mothers and fathers who, instead of excitedly preparing for their newborn or enjoying those early years with their little ones, are worried and distressed about how they will provide for them. Too many families are missing out on a nutritional safety net that would nourish their children and set the stage for a lifetime of good health. It is in the gift of the Government to complete the modernisation of Healthy Start through auto enrolment to ensure all families get the help they are entitled to.

- Introduce auto enrolment, making Healthy Start an 'opt-out' rather than 'opt-in' scheme.
- Establish the necessary data sharing between the DWP and the DHSC to enable auto enrolment.
- The Chancellor in his 2023 Autumn Budget must allocate the DHSC greater funding to cover Healthy Start payments for all eligible beneficiaries. The DHSC must ring fence this funding to ensure it's being spent on Healthy Start payments.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> ONS 2023. Online: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/costoflivinginsights/food>
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- <sup>4</sup> NHSBSA, Healthy Start Uptake data, November 2023. Online: <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthcare-professionals>
- <sup>5</sup> Scottish Government, Take-up rates of Scottish benefits, October 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> National Food Strategy, July 2021. Online: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>
- <sup>7</sup> UK Parliament. Online: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3474>
- <sup>8</sup> Online: <https://lewellbuck.com/response-from-the-government-to-my-healthy-start-scheme-letter/>
- <sup>9</sup> Online: <https://lewellbuck.com/healthystart-letter/>
- <sup>10</sup> Online: <https://lewellbuck.com/response-from-the-government-to-my-healthy-start-scheme-letter/>
- <sup>11</sup> Letter from Mastercard to Emma Lewell-Buck MP, October 2023.
- <sup>12</sup> UK Parliament. Online: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-19/185900>
- <sup>13</sup> UK Parliament. Online: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-09-04/197437>
- <sup>14</sup> Freedom of Information Request from DHSC sent to Emma Lewell-Buck MP, November 2023.
- <sup>15</sup> Freedom of Information Request from DHSC sent to Emma Lewell-Buck MP, November 2023.
- <sup>16</sup> UK Parliament. Online: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-06-08/188560>
- <sup>17</sup> Grace Harvey, Manchester Healthy Start Voucher Uptake Project, November 2023.
- <sup>18</sup> A Healthy Start for Liverpool, 2022. Online: <https://www.feedingliverpool.org/a-healthy-start-for-liverpool-new-report/>