



INCREASING HEALTHY START UPTAKE

A FEEDING BRITAIN CASE STUDY

Healthy Start

The Government funded Healthy Start scheme has been reported by both healthcare professionals and families to play a vital role in ensuring access to nutritious food, improving diets, and lessening the strain on household budgets. Despite the scheme being praised for its hugely beneficial outcomes the current take up rate in England is just 64%. Below we outline some potential barriers to individuals and families accessing the scheme and case studies from regions which have been successful in overcoming them.



THE ISSUE

The Government funded Healthy Start scheme provides vouchers to families on low incomes that can be exchanged for cow's milk, and fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables. The scheme also provides access to Healthy start vitamins for expectant and nursing mothers, and children over 6 months old. Healthy Start has been reported by both healthcare professionals and families to play a vital role in ensuring access to nutritious food, improving diets, and lessening the strain on household budgets.

Despite these hugely beneficial outcomes, figures obtained in the Spring of 2018 through parliamentary questions tabled by Frank Field MP indicate that one third (33.3%) of those eligible to receive the vouchers are not doing so. The current take up rate for Healthy Start vouchers in England is 64%, with the lowest take up rates in a local authority at just 47%.

Quick Facts

- Food vouchers have a fixed value of £3.10.
- To qualify, families must be in receipt of social benefits and/or have a family income of £16,190 or less
- Eligible families receive 1 voucher per week for each pregnant woman or child aged between 12 and 48 months, and 2 vouchers per week for families with babies under the age of 12 months.
- All pregnant women under the age of 18 qualify regardless of income or benefit status.
- Coupons for Healthy Start vitamins are also available for expectant or nursing mothers and children over 6 months old.

Here we outline some of the barriers to reaching eligible families, along with a range of tested interventions for increasing the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers. We conclude with three Case studies from Local authorities who have been successful in increasing the uptake of Healthy Start Vouchers and/or who have generally had high levels of participation.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS OF THE SCHEME

Across the UK at least 135,671 eligible families are not applying for Healthy Start vouchers. There are a number of reasons put forward for this by families themselves, professionals promoting the scheme, and researchers.

1. Process of applying for vouchers- while application forms are easily accessible on the Healthy Start website, to complete the application it must be signed by a midwife or health visitor. For those who are not already connected with a midwife or health visitor this additional step can be difficult to accomplish and leads to opting out of the scheme.

2. Local management of the scheme- in some instances researchers have found that there is little coordination of the Healthy start scheme at the local level, which leads to confusion around how the scheme works and who is responsible.

3. Lack of robust data- we have heard from at least one local council that they struggle to adequately monitor uptake of the scheme due to a lack of data. For example, Leicester City Council requested access to information on areas receiving vouchers but not using them and were told that this information was not available.

4. Engaging GPs- research conducted by academics at the University of Bristol found that GPs are rarely prescribing or signing Healthy Start voucher applications, despite having regular contact with eligible families.

5. Communication and support from Healthy Start- there is a desire for more regular updates and communication from Healthy Start, including changes to eligibility and the application process, and regularly updated advertising and promotional materials. Some local authorities have also reported that the Healthy Start website is not always up to date, particularly around locations which accept vouchers.

6. Training for local councils and healthcare professionals- success of the scheme relies to a large degree on the knowledge held by healthcare professionals and their confidence in speaking about the programme with clients. Adequate training opportunities are not always available for local councils and healthcare professionals.

7. Reaching everyone- research by academics at the University of Bristol has recently highlighted that some groups may find it more difficult to gain information on the scheme or apply. Those experiencing unplanned disruptions in housing or fluctuating income, families with parents under the age of 18, and/or families with parents who speak English as a second language, were found to be at a disadvantage. The study concluded that the diet of children in some of the most vulnerable families may therefore not be protected.

8. Logistics- some parents report difficulties accessing Healthy Start vitamins. This is largely due to confusion (from both the families and healthcare professionals) over where they can get them from.

9. Processing time- some families report that it can take up to 2-3 months to process an application. Others still never hear back after submitting an application and are required to put in several. In many cases this has led to parents giving up and opting out.

10. Retailers participation- some small businesses and retailers have reported difficulties around registering with the Healthy Start scheme. Others have said their participation is difficult due to long wait times before receiving their financial claims back. This reduces the potential number of retailers that families can exchange their vouchers with.

INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE UPTAKE

While there are several interventions at the national level which would help increase the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers, the following interventions are aimed at local councils and community organisations seeking to improve the uptake in their own area.

1. Convene a steering group to coordinate efforts- the steering group can be part of an already existing network or simply a loose coalition, but it should aim to include public health professionals, health care professionals, and community organisations who serve families and children. The steering group can be useful in spearheading communications and coordinating efforts to monitor and increase uptake. This should also pool all information in one space and reduce the confusion that is often cited as a reason behind low uptake and people dropping out midway through applications.

2. Offer universal Healthy Start vitamins- several Local Authorities have had success in increasing uptake of Healthy Start vouchers by removing the means tested barrier to receiving Healthy Start vitamins. By offering all children and expectant and nursing mothers free Healthy Start vitamins healthcare professionals get a chance to discuss eligibility for Healthy Start vouchers with families.

CASE STUDIES

Barnsley Council

Sharron O'Rourke, Lifestyles coordinator

Barnsley Council have experienced relatively high levels of take up of Healthy Start vouchers. The council, healthcare professionals, and participating families all report that the scheme has had a significant impact on fruit and veg intake, improved diet and physical well-being, and reduced stress on budgets.

In addition to Healthy Start vouchers Barnsley Family Centres also provide to piloted areas, Alexandra Rose vouchers to eligible families, which provide an additional £3-£12 per week. To promote and monitor the impact of the Healthy Start and Alexandra Rose voucher schemes, a steering group was formed which comprises Barnsley Council, 0-19 service, the Infant Feeding Service Family Centres and Barnsley Hospital Foundation Trust Public Health Midwife. Some strategies employed by the steering group and BMBC Public Health to promote Healthy Start include:

- Public Health provide funding for 2 months' free supply of Healthy Start vitamins for all pregnant women at booking, all breastfed babies at 2 weeks of age and all babies between 8-12 months of age these are distributed in the family centres, ante natal clinic at the hospital, by the 0-19 service staff and midwives.
- Vitamins at a reduced rate are sold in the family centres for families not eligible to the Health Start scheme. Healthy start is part of the Infant Feeding Policy and Pathways.
- The scheme is promoted at every contact along the Healthy child programme and at events which ranges from stalls at community events, displays at community and Family centres, social media, and consistently updated materials for distribution during safeguarding week, infant feeding week, and various community events.
- Training and audit for health professionals is conducted to ensure that everyone has the knowledge and skills to discuss the Healthy Start scheme, nutrition and breastfeeding with parents at every opportunity and that they are supported to fill out the application form.

Rose Vouchers

The Rose Vouchers for Fruit & Veg Project helps families on low incomes to buy fresh fruit and vegetables and supports them to give their children the healthiest possible start.

A family receives £3 of Rose Vouchers for each child, every week, or £6 if the child is under one years old.



- Ensuring that all family centres, schools, private nurseries, health clinics, midwives, and 0- 19 services have up to date information on the scheme and that they feel empowered to discuss it with families and parents.
- Application forms are added to the information packs for families who are pregnant or have children under 4 years of ages accessing the food banks

Halton Council

Julia Rosser, Consultant in Public Health

Over the last few years Halton Council have been doing some focused work on increasing Healthy start uptake. In 2015 it was decided that due to low uptake of Healthy Start vitamins, and higher than average levels of deprivation, it would be valuable to provide universal access to Healthy Start vitamins. All pregnant and breastfeeding women now receive free Healthy Start vitamins through their midwife, and each child receives one bottle of Healthy Start vitamins around six months of age from their health visitor. This is not means tested, and is funded by the public health team.



A multi-agency early years group worked to increase accessibility for those who claim Healthy Start vitamin vouchers for their child by making them available through midwives, health visitors, health centres and children's centres. The programme was advertised in health centres and children's centres using social media, leaflets, posters and pop ups, and through the health visitors and midwives themselves.

The team were keen to ensure that by providing free vitamins they didn't inadvertently reduce the uptake of the Healthy Start vouchers. To protect against this they produced some materials specifically on obtaining free vitamins, and additional materials on applying to receive the Healthy Start vouchers.

When women accessed their vitamins, the midwife or health visitor also discussed with families whether they were eligible to claim Healthy Start vouchers, and where necessary, supported them to complete the forms and apply for the vouchers.

The Health improvement team and nursing teams have also run ad hoc sessions at community events, to remind people of the programme and how to claim Healthy Start vouchers, and work closely with the local Citizens Advice Bureau and DWP to ensure that residents receive consistent advice and support in claiming vouchers.

Leicester City Council

Amy Curnock, Children's Health Promoter

Uptake rates of Healthy Start vouchers in Leicester city are generally around 72%. While this is above the national average, Leicester City Council are keen to increase the percentage of eligible families enrolled.

One of the ways the council has been trying to do this is by running a pilot at Leicester Market for a few traders to start accepting voucher. While more market stalls are now accepting vouchers take up rates have not been as high as predicted. Efforts will be made to promote the acceptance of vouchers at market stalls to eligible families and individuals in the coming year.

Healthy Start vouchers are primarily promoted in Leicester City through Health Visitors and Midwives. These health care professionals are typically the first to identify eligible families and individuals, and will assist them to complete the application forms. Information on the scheme is also circulated through various networks including, but not limited to: schools, pharmacies, GP's, early years settings, children's centres, dentists, and various newsletters that the council currently share information with, including Eco Schools and Head Teachers. The Council are now working with the local Job Centres to include voucher information and are supporting Job Coaches to help them signpost potentially eligible people to the Healthy Start website. A short video on the Healthy Start scheme has been created and shared with all key partners and organisations to be used online or on in-house advertising and information monitors.

Leicester City Council are now considering an audit of shops in the Central area of the City to determine whether they are displaying Healthy Start window stickers, and whether they are still accepting the vouchers. From this exercise they plan to create maps that can be shared within the local area through children's centres, midwives, nurseries, and other community centres, to signpost participating families to local retailers.

For more information or support to increase uptake in your own area please contact:

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