

A Policy for Improving Child Nutrition – Securing Full Take-Up of Healthy Start Vouchers and Free School Meals in England

Summary

It is proposed that:

1. Legislation is brought forward to provide a firm legal basis for the automatic registration of all eligible children for Healthy Start vouchers and free school meals.
2. The Department for Work and Pensions amends the Universal Credit application form and online journal, so that new and existing claimants are given the option of ticking a box to consent to their data being used automatically to register eligible children in their household for Healthy Start vouchers.
3. Local authorities amend the Council Tax Support application form, and other forms where appropriate, so that applicants are given the option of ticking a box to consent to their data being used automatically to register eligible children in their household for free school meals.
4. A design sprint is held with families on low incomes, local authority representatives, the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, Feeding Britain, and officials from the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Health and Social Care, and the Department for Education, to co-produce detailed and workable policies for both securing and then maintaining full take-up of Healthy Start vouchers and free school meals.

Introduction

This proposal stems from a roundtable discussion held on 8th June 2021 which was attended by representatives from Feeding Britain, the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, and the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University, as well as officers from Gateshead Council, Royal Borough of Greenwich, Leeds City Council, Leicester City Council, Liverpool City Council, Newark & Sherwood District Council, Newham Borough Council, and Nottinghamshire County Council.

The purpose of the discussion was to assess the case for automatic registration, identify the challenges associated with this idea, and begin to develop some broad proposals for a workable scheme.

The case for automatic registration

Local authorities and schools, as well as other public bodies, are putting a huge amount of time, effort, and resources into initiatives that aim to increase the take-up of Healthy Start vouchers and free school meals. Despite those efforts, 44% of potential beneficiaries are not registered for Healthy Start and, as a result, £1 million worth of vouchers go unclaimed each week. Of particular concern is the finding that some families are having to rely on food banks because they are not registered for their Healthy Start entitlement.

Reasons for low take-up include:

- a lack of awareness among both potential beneficiaries and community organisations
- language barriers
- an application process that can feel stigmatising to potential beneficiaries, and is often confusing, complex, and bureaucratic for both potential beneficiaries and officials
- concerns about the potential impact on other social security benefits

It was suggested that, as a swift and effective way of maximising take-up and removing barriers to entitlement, the basis for Healthy Start and free school meal registration should shift from 'opt in' to 'opt out', through an automated process.

Challenges and Solutions

The availability, matching, and use of data were identified as key challenges within the current system. It was suggested that data covering free school meal eligibility tend to sit within different tiers of local government, and data covering Healthy Start eligibility are likely to sit within the Department for Work and Pensions. With data sitting in different organisations, it is difficult to access and share without the relevant consent being in place.

It was suggested also that, in respect of free school meals, reforms may be needed to ensure pupils at all schools, including academies, are covered by the sharing of data and its use for automatic registration, and that children who attend school in one borough, but live in another, do not fall through the cracks.

In general, it was suggested that greater clarity would be required, potentially through legislation, around where the responsibility for automatic registration, and for the handling or sharing of accompanying data, should sit within different layers of central and local government.

Nonetheless, it was also proposed that in the meantime the existing application forms for different social security benefits, and other income-related support schemes, should be amended so as to gain from potential beneficiaries their consent to data being processed for the purpose of automatic registration. For Healthy Start, the inclusion of a tick box in the Universal Credit application form and/or online journal could work. For free school meals, the same could apply to the Council Tax Support application form.

A design sprint was presented as one potential way of co-producing a robust system of automatic registration with families and government officials. Among the advantages of this method is the collection of multiple viewpoints from the full range of stakeholders, thereby significantly reducing the risks of unintended outcomes or consequences.