

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU



Cc: Jackie Doyle-Price MP and Seema Kennedy MP



Dear Secretary of State,

National programme to improve take-up of Healthy Start vouchers

An increasing number of people in the UK do not know where their next meal will come from, with an estimated 8.4 million experiencing household food insecurity, including approximately 19% of children in the UK.



We want to draw your attention to one of the Government's vital lifelines of support for some of those most in need: the Healthy Start scheme, which provides young and low-income pregnant women, and families on a low income with children under 4 years old, with a voucher for £3.10 per week (or two vouchers for an infant) to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables, cows' milk and first infant formula.



Despite the significant positive impact these vouchers can have on a household's budget and access to a healthy diet, the proportion of eligible people claiming the vouchers has decreased dramatically over the past five years, and varies significantly around the UK. According to data from the Healthy Start Issuing Unit, average take-up was only 64% in England and Wales in 2018. As a result families missed out on an estimated £28.6 million worth of vouchers. In one London Borough, for example, take-up was as low as 54%, meaning over £159,000 of vouchers for healthy food was lost to local families in just one area.



We call on the Government to fund a national programme to ensure that midwives, health visitors, GPs and other relevant staff in health, social care and early years settings actively help all eligible pregnant women and new parents claim their Healthy Start vouchers. We ask you to work with local authorities and the third sector to make sure that no child or expectant mother misses out on this important part of the welfare safety net. This programme could be funded from the estimated £28.6 million of Healthy Start vouchers that went unclaimed last year.



Local councils' public health teams have shown they can increase voucher take-up in their area when providing the right training and promotional resources, but with tight budgets and competing priorities, this results in a postcode lottery of access to support and information for eligible people.



The Government's recent commitment to measure household food insecurity is a step in the right direction, along with the Department of Health and Social Care's pledge in June 2018 to consult on Healthy Start as part of efforts to address childhood obesity and ongoing digital pilots. However, these reforms will take time and a start date for the consultation has not yet been given.

As findings from the Children's Future Food Inquiry illustrate, increasing take-up of the vouchers is an essential component of ensuring the health and future prospects of our children.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet to discuss our proposals, showcase best practice examples from local areas and determine how these could be supported further across the country. We would also like confirmation of the date for the consultation that was committed to last year.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming

Gill Walton, Chief Executive, Royal College of Midwives

Shirley Cramer, CBE, Chief Executive, Royal Society for Public Health

Professor Russell Viner, President, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Emma Revie, Chief Executive, Trussell Trust

Lynne Stubbings, Chair, National Federation of Women's Institute

Tom Andrews, Director, Sustainable Food Cities

Rob Percival, Head of Policy (Food and Health), Soil Association

Anna Taylor, OBE, Executive Director, Food Foundation

Katie Palmer, Programme Manager Food Sense Wales

Niall Cooper, Director, Church Action on Poverty

Helen Crawley, Director, First Steps Nutrition

Andy Burman, Chief Executive, British Dietetic Association

Dr Cheryll Adams CBE, Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting



Food Sense Wales
Synnwyr Bwyd Cymru



Church Action
on Poverty



FIRST STEPS
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The Association
of UK Dietitians



Institute of
Health Visiting
Excellence in Practice



Obi Amadi, Director, Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association

Kieron Boyle, Chief Executive, Guy's and St Thomas' Charity

Annie Olivier, National Director, Feeding Britain

Katharine Jenner RNutr, Campaign Director, Action on Sugar

Professor Graham MacGregor, Chairman of Action on Salt, Action on Salt

Kirsty McHugh, CEO, Mayor's Fund for London

Geoff Tansey, Chair, Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty 2014-2015

Victoria Williams, Director, Food Matters

Dan Crossley, Executive Director, Food Ethics Council

Samra Said, UK Domestic Programmes Manager, Human Appeal

Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator, Independent Food Aid Network

Dan Parker, Chief Executive, Living Loud

Neha Agarwal, Director of Development, The Akshaya Patra Foundation UK



Food Ethics Council

