

Jo Churchill MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health
39 Victoria Street
London
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22 June 2020

Dear Minister,

Accelerating the online application process for Healthy Start

During the Covid-19 crisis we have seen a significant increase in food insecurity, with an estimated five million people (17%) living in households with children in the UK having experienced food insecurity during the first five weeks of COVID-19 lockdown, as reported by the Food Foundation. As economic uncertainty continues in the coming months, it is vital the Government keeps taking steps to ensure the most vulnerable among society can afford their next meal.

Healthy Start provides young and low-income pregnant women and low-income families with children under four years with vouchers worth £3.10 per week (£6.20 for infants) to purchase vegetables, fruit, milk and infant formula, worth up to £900 per child. The scheme also provides vitamin vouchers and therefore ensures a good source of Vitamin D, which the Government has highlighted as important during this period of limited exposure to the outdoors for many. We welcome the initial steps taken over the last year to digitise the scheme, particularly as only paper application forms exist currently. **Now is the time to complete this modernisation programme to support vulnerable families, specifically by accelerating the digital transformation of the application process.**

Many families do not have a printer at home and so would normally rely on children's centres, libraries or other community services to print or provide application forms. With libraries closed and reduced contact with health and community services, our partners in Local Authorities and public health teams report that many families are struggling to access paper forms at this time of great need. Enabling families to apply online from their own home will give more spending power to those who need it most right now. Ensuring pregnant women and young children have access to the nutritional safety net that Healthy Start vouchers provide, and which can enhance intake of fruit and vegetables, is particularly important for current and future health.

There is also likely to be a significant increase in pregnant women and families eligible for Healthy Start, both during the peak of the pandemic and beyond. We understand that 1.4 million people claimed for Universal Credit during a recent



four-week period, compared to 240,000 typically. If just 10% of these new claimants are eligible for Healthy Start the programme could see up to 140,000 new families applying for the scheme, compared to 1,400 new claimants during an average four-week period over 2019.

Processing this many paper applications is inefficient and labour intensive at a time when resources need to be deployed effectively. Families can request paper applications be posted to them by calling the helpline, but again, this is not a time or cost-effective approach now or with increased demand. Fast-tracking completion of the online application process will have long-term returns for both families and the NHS Business Services Authority. As you know, new regulations to support the digital rollout were already passed in March 2020, helpfully laying the key groundwork for government to now re-prioritise this vital scheme.

While we understand that over the last month many resources within NHS Business Services Authority have needed to be redeployed, **development of the online application form for Healthy Start must now be accelerated in order to ensure vulnerable families can afford the food they need, and to prepare for a likely swell in applications. We recognise that resources are rightly being prioritised to address the immediate crisis, but we also call for the investment in policies that improve the general health and resilience of the population.** We are aware that significant work has already been completed to develop an online application form and believe that this could be live in a very short time.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss our proposals as a matter of some urgency. We feel accelerating the online application process for the Healthy Start would be an important step to support vulnerable families at this time of crisis and during the aftermath. We would also like confirmation of the date for the full Healthy Start consultation which the Department of Health and Social Care committed to in June 2018 in Chapter 2 of Childhood Obesity: a plan for action.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming; Member of the Defra Food and Vulnerability voluntary sector liaison group, the London Strategic Coordination Group for food and vulnerability, and the food and vulnerability lead for the Sustain alliance

Gill Walton, Chief Executive, The Royal College of Midwives

Duncan Stephenson, Deputy CEO, Royal Society of Public Health

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



Councillor Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the Local Government Association
Community Wellbeing Board

Lynne Stubbings, Chair of The Women's Institute

Anna Taylor, Chief Executive of the Food Foundation

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

Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator, Independent Food Aid Network

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Simon Capewell MD DSc, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology, University of
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Dr Cheryl Adams CBE, FRSPH, D(Nurs), MSc, Executive Director, Institute of
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Stephanie Wood, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters

Helen Crawley, Director, First Steps Nutrition Trust

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Dan Parker, Chief Executive, Living Loud

Dr. Rachel Loopstra, Department of Nutritional Sciences, King's College London

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

Dan Crossley, Executive Director, Food Ethics Council



Food Sense Wales
Synnwyr Bwyd Cymru



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

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Claire Pritchard, CEO, Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency

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Kerry Melville, Coordinator, Belfast Food Network

Emily Fay, Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance Co-ordinator

Councillor Kemi Akinola (Wandsworth), Founder/CEO of Be-Enriched and Director of Brixton People's Kitchen

Rebecca Smith, Deputy CEO, Social Enterprise Kent

Jen Griffiths, Chair of Good Food Flintshire and the North Wales Food Poverty Alliance

Virginia Nimarkoh, Director, Lambeth Larder Community Food Resource

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