

Best Start Foods Event

Key Messages

22nd May 2018

Nourish Scotland and Voluntary Health Scotland hosted a half-day seminar in Edinburgh to look at the reform of Healthy Start Vouchers proposed by the Scottish Government. This event provided a forum for retailers, third-sector organisations, and public health practitioners to share insights about the issues with the current scheme and discuss how these can be best addressed through the new scheme.

We had presentations from Sandra Passmore from Birmingham City Council talking about their research into Healthy Start Voucher and action plan to increase uptake, and from Tony McGale from Scottish Government who explained how the new scheme might work. Below we summarise some of the key points of the discussions.

Payment system

There was a consensus that no one size fits all. Removing the need for retailers to register was seen as a great improvement. However, concerns were raised about excluding small independent and community-run shops who cannot afford the cost of electronic payment systems. There were various suggestions to address this issue:

- A mixed paper voucher and e-card system, leaving recipients to choose the option that suits them better. Another suggestion was for all cards to have a unique identifier number which could be entered into an online system by the retailer to process the payment.
- The option to use smartphone technology, but lack of connectivity in parts of Scotland would be an issue.
- Encouraging the roll out of e-payment systems to all independent and community-run shops through cheaper IT packages, grants, or other financial incentives

Further points about using smartphone technology:

- A Best Start Foods app could be helpful on various levels: to check the balance on the e-card, to pay (e.g. apple pay, or to provide a unique number or barcode which would be scanned by the shopkeeper), and for marketing purposes (recipes, seasonal produce, special offer)

- Developing a new, stand-alone app for Best Start Foods was discouraged by some, suggesting instead to link it with an existing popular app, such as a pregnancy app.
- As some recipients may not have smartphones or data, the app should be an optional feature.

Given the considerable differences in the cost of living across the country, it was considered whether the value of Best Start Foods 'vouchers' should be higher in areas where the cost of groceries is higher, for example in rural and remote areas.

Concerns about eligibility and registration

Concerns were raised about the ability of kinship carers to receive Best Start Foods payments.

The process should be made more flexible so that not only health professional can sign the form and as to enable voluntary organisations staff to sign the form or to serve as intermediary.

The Best Start Grant and Foods schemes should be an integral part of the health visiting pathway.

Parents should not need to re-register after birth, this requirement should be scrapped, or be taken care of by the midwife or other health practitioners.

Retailers

The lack of knowledge of retail staff about Healthy Start Vouchers was highlighted as an issue. More should be done to improve awareness and knowledge of Best Start Foods, in part with marketing materials. For the independents, information could be shared through the Cash and Carry businesses. The SGF Healthy Living Programme Team may facilitate this as they already work with all those stakeholders.

It was also argued that retailers should have a duty to promote the scheme through in-shop marketing and staff training, and suggestions were made as to how the multiples could be engaged to add value to the scheme, for example by giving out extra Nectar points or extra discounts for Best Start Foods card users.

Joining-up with other Government policies

The need to join up Best Start Foods with other health or social justice Government policies and initiatives was raised, notably:

- The Healthy Weight Strategy
- Eat Better Feel Better (e.g. link through the app)
- The Baby Box

Wider measures to enable healthy diets

Tackling clusters is key. Access to fresh produce also needs to be improved in deprived neighbourhoods and rural areas.

It was stressed that the voluntary sector is playing an important role in supporting many of the families that are eligible for Best Start Foods. The new scheme should do more to recognise and harness this support network. Continued Government funding for the third sector is also very important.

Grassroots organisations are also really important for reaching out to vulnerable or isolated communities and families. Community health or food growing initiatives, for example, can be a critical contact point to raise awareness of Best Start Foods, distribute a veg box, or promote wider health initiatives.

It is also important to ensure that all families have the facilities to cook and store food (fridge and freezer).

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