BRIEFING FOR REGISTERED SOCIAL LANDLORDS
NHS Healthy Start Scheme

This briefing paper has been developed to support Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) raise awareness of the NHS Healthy Start Scheme and benefits this can bring to tenants and wider family members. It includes key information on the scheme, examples of successful practice delivered by RSLs to date across Cheshire & Merseyside, and contact details for each of the nine Local Authorities to help ensure eligible families can access the support they are entitled to. The briefing paper is part of a workstream on social housing and food insecurity Health Equalities Group is delivering for the Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance as part of the *Strategic Obesity Project*.

Background to the Healthy Start Scheme

The Healthy Start Scheme [1], introduced in 2006, provides vouchers to low-income families in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to purchase fruits, vegetables, pulses, milk, formula and free vitamins. The scheme provides a means-tested nutritional safety net for low-income families, helping to increase access to healthier food during pregnancy and the early years. This is particularly important, given that 18% of households with children in the UK are experiencing food insecurity [2].

Currently, families in receipt of Healthy Start receive a weekly voucher worth £4.25 for children aged 1–4 years and for women who are more than 10 weeks pregnant, and £8.50 per week for children under the age of one in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland [3]. The 10-Year Health Plan for England launched in July 2025 sets out an uplift to the scheme that is due to take effect between 2026–2027. Under this update, pregnant women and children aged one to under four will each receive £4.65 per week, an increase from the current £4.25, while children under one year will receive £9.30 per week, up from £8.50 [4].

Families may be eligible to apply for the Healthy Start scheme if they are more than 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under the age of four. To qualify, they must be receiving certain benefits, including income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, pension credit with the child addition, or universal credit with a take home pay of £408 or less per month. Individuals that are under 18 and more than 10 weeks pregnant can still claim even if they do not receive any benefits [1]. Individuals that are not British citizens may still quality for the Healthy Start scheme if they have at least one British child under the age of four, their family earns £408 or less per month, and they are unable to claim public funds due to their immigration status. To apply for Healthy Start, eligible families must complete an online application through the official NHS Healthy Start website. If someone cannot apply online, they can apply over the telephone by calling the **NHS Healthy Start helpline on 0300 330 7010**.

Overcoming barriers to Healthy Start uptake

Although the Healthy Start scheme provides essential nutritional support to low-income pregnant women and families with young children, uptake continues to fall below the recommended target [5]. This is largely due to several barriers, including a complex application process and eligibility criteria, limited awareness of the scheme, digital exclusion, and stigma [6]. As a result, many eligible families are unable to access the full benefits of Healthy Start.

Barrier	Proposed solution
Lack of awareness of the scheme	• Train up Healthy Start (HS) champions across different settings • Promote through midwives, health visitors, GP's, pharmacies, schools, children's centres & family hubs • Social media campaigns • Local Authority campaigns • Promote the scheme through housing associations
Complex application process	• Auto-enrolment to the scheme • Sign-up support provided through HS champions, staff and volunteers
Value of card not keeping up with rising costs	• Regular increases to payments in line with inflation

Stigma around benefits	• Reframing as not a 'benefit' – e.g. a health and nutrition programme • Positive messaging about giving children the best start in life • Embed HS discussions into all routine maternity and early years contacts
Digital exclusion / illiteracy	• Establish drop-in sessions where HS champions, staff or volunteers can assist with completing forms (community hubs, family hubs, libraries etc). • Use simple, visual, and translated resources to explain the scheme. • Provide assisted digital support through community hubs, housing associations, etc

Current uptake and the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to increase uptake

As of April 2024, the national uptake of the Healthy Start scheme was only 62.4% [5]. Despite national efforts to strengthen the scheme, uptake remains persistently below the Government's 75% target [6], meaning that thousands of eligible families are missing out on vital nutritional support. A multi-stakeholder approach is essential to address this gap, as barriers to uptake often span across different health services, local and national government, and community settings, and therefore require coordinated action to overcome. Blackpool provides a strong example of how this works in practice [7]. In March 2022, NHS data revealed that only 63% of eligible families in Blackpool were receiving Healthy Start, with many families struggling with the digital application system or unaware of their entitlement. Through the Better Start Partnership [8], which brings together the Local Authority, NHS services, Blackpool Teaching Hospitals Trust, Policy and community organisations, a collaborative campaigned was launched to improve access. This included the introduction of Money Saving Community Connectors to support families face-to-face at Cost-of-Living drop-ins, targeted outreach through emails and social media, and practical help completing applications. As a result, uptake in Blackpool rose to 72% within 12 months, placing the area well above national average and making it one of the highest in England. The success in Blackpool highlights that collaborative action across sectors is vital to addressing barriers to Healthy Start uptake. RSLs are particularly well placed to contribute, given their strong connections with tenants, their families and communities who stand to benefit most.

What role can RSLs take in promoting Healthy Start?

RSLs have direct contact with tenants, their families and local communities and can play a key role in promoting Healthy Start to ensure eligible households do not miss out. Several social housing associations based in Cheshire & Merseyside are already active in this area, including Torus Foundation, who have taken several approaches in supporting the Healthy Start scheme and encouraging uptake among families in their neighbourhoods [9]. This includes: raising awareness through trusted food security projects such as food pantries, community shops and cooking sessions; providing one-to-one support for tenants and their families to navigate eligibility and applications; collaborating with Local Authorities to strengthen promotion and share best practices across different channels; and, aligning Healthy Start messaging with other nutrition and wellbeing initiatives so that families view is as part of a broader package of support rather than a stand-alone offer. Torus Foundation has also partnered with Feeding Liverpool, the city of Liverpool's food alliance, to develop and train Healthy Start champions across the city, helping to build sustained community capacity to promote the scheme.

Other social housing associations have also contributed to raising awareness of the Healthy Start scheme. In Knowsley, Livv Housing Group have used digital media materials to promote the scheme through digital screens in their high-rise housing while ForHousing has taken a similar approach in Knowsley by sharing digital media and printed promotional materials across their social housing and one-stop shops. In Wirral, the council's Public Health Department teamed up with Magenta Living to spread the word about the Healthy Start scheme. Leaflets and posters have been distributed across social supermarkets and 13 community settings across their sites and a localised Healthy Start video was also shared with their Social Impact Lead, reaching a wide audience including Magenta's Customer and Communities Committee. Jobs Plus staff have also been linked in to promote the scheme as part of Magenta's Bidston Rise properties and engaged young parents living at Magenta's Out House Scheme.

However, despite positive progress demonstrated by these social housing associations, significant gaps remain, and many eligible families are still missing out. Engaging further RSLs is essential to expand reach, raise awareness and provide practical support to families, ensuring the scheme is embedded across communities.

The following section highlights approaches that RSLs can take to support with raising awareness and increasing uptake of Healthy Start:

- **Communicate with tenants, their families and local communities**: Share Healthy Start information through newsletters, tenancy welcome packs, email updates, digital screens, or noticeboards.
- **Display resources**: Posters, leaflets, and other materials are available to raise awareness. Promotional materials can be freely accessed through the NHS Healthy Start Communications Toolkit or by contacting your Local Authority (see local authority contact details and localised promotional assets available on Page 4 of this briefing paper)
- **Localised promotional film**: If you have access to digital screens, please check the appendix to see whether your local authority has developed a promotional film to raise awareness of the Healthy Start scheme, which you may be able to share on your screens.
- **Three key takeaway messages**: The following three key messages highlight the main benefits of the scheme in a way that is easy to understand and share:
    - Healthy Start can be used to purchase fruits, vegetables, milk, pulses and formula;
    - The Healthy Start scheme also provides access to essentials vitamins;
    - Vouchers can be used widely: anywhere displaying the Mastercard logo accepts Healthy Start

Free Healthy Start training opportunity for housing associations in Cheshire & Merseyside:

There will be opportunities for RSL staff and volunteers to undertake **Healthy Start Community Champions training**, which will be delivered online from November 2025. Health Equalities Group will deliver three, 1-hour training sessions between November 2025 and March 2026, providing RSLs with key information on how to promote the NHS Healthy Start scheme to tenants and families. Taking a 'train the trainer' approach, the training will give participants the knowledge and skills to train up other members of staff within their organisations, plus volunteers and tenants themselves, building a growing network of Healthy Start Community Champions.

Further details on the training, delivery dates & registration is available here

For further support and information on how you can help raise awareness and promote uptake of Healthy Start in your area, please see the appendix on Page 4 below, which includes key local authority contacts, localised signposting materials, and suggestions for helping to promote Healthy Start.

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References

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Appendix: Cheshire and Merseyside Local Authority / Place contacts & local Healthy Start materials available

Local Authority	Contact	Work Undertaken to Promote Healthy Start Scheme / Resources / Signposting
Warrington	Rachel Cartwright: rcartwright@warrington.gov.uk	• Promotional film • Leaflets and stickers provided by Public Health Team
Liverpool	Liz Fisher: Liz.Fisher@liverpool.gov.uk	• E-learning & Promotional film • HS banners available for RSLs – contact Liz or Gentian Khan from Feeding Liverpool directly • Social media campaigns • Worked with organisations / partners to add HS questions into assessments
Sefton	Suzanne McCumiskey: Suzanne.McCumiskey@sefton.gov.uk	• Promotional film (coming soon) • Localised digital / hard-copy materials available for RSLs • CAB - 0808 278 7841 – signpost for further support with HS applications / eligibility / etc
Knowsley	Dian Higgins: Dian.Higgins@knowsley.gov.uk	• Resources provided to family hubs, early years settings, children's centres • Digital promotional materials, stickers, promotional materials available • For further information / promotional materials.
St Helens	Swathi Yogesh: SwathiYogesh@sthelens.gov.uk	• Promotional film • Data-led multi-channel approach • Digital marketing: HS webpage, digital screens distributed to multiple partners • HS Champions Training
Wirral	Sarah Kinsella: sarahkinsella@wirral.gov.uk	• Promotional film • Localised HS poster • Libraries, family hubs – support with digital applications
Halton	Matt Hancock: Matt.Hancock@halton.gov.uk	• Regular Social media messaging • Copies of national materials on request • Cost of living information & food insecurity support
Cheshire East	Graham Brown: graham.brown@cvsce.org.uk	• Range of promotional materials including posters, leaflets, stickers available from CVCSCE • HS Community Champions training • Localised promotional film • Citizens Advice Services – Cheshire East • New Life Church in Congleton and Her Place in Crewe – received funding to train HS champions
Cheshire West & Chester	Sharon Marshall: Sharon.Marshall@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk	• Localised HS Flyer • HS Lunch & Learn Sessions • Early years newsletter – contains information around Healthy Start • Online resources with a direct link to HS resources: - Benefits and welfare help | Cheshire West & Chester - Live Well Site | Live Well Cheshire West - Cost of Living | Cheshire West & Chester - Benefits Calculator | Cheshire West & Chester • Cost of Living Newsletter • Inspiring Change Together | Participate now