



Birmingham City Council

Councillor Paulette Hamilton
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Our ref: PH/CAB/sm

Date: 23rd June 2021

By email

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

Dear Dr Coffey

Re: Healthy Start Scheme Registration Process

As a city, Birmingham has approximately 19,567 citizens who are eligible to register for the Healthy Start Scheme which, as you will be aware, provides free vitamins to pregnant women and their child/ren under 4 and weekly food vouchers to the value of £4.25 per child. This scheme is aimed to act as a nutritional safety net and support the eating habits in low-income families and in young pregnant women.

The number of children who are currently food insecure in Birmingham is a significant problem, with long-term consequences for their health and wellbeing. Birmingham City Council is dedicated towards helping to reduce this impact but we have seen a considerable increase in the number of citizens now eligible for Healthy Start and this number continues to rise due to the impact of COVID. Covid has shone a light on the disparities within the City and growing health inequalities within many of our communities.

Even before Covid, some of the Wards in Birmingham have the highest relative child poverty rates before housing costs in the country, these include Birmingham Hodge Hill 53%, Ladywood 50% and Hall Green 46% (DWP and HMRC Children in low income families: local area statistics 2014/15 to 2018/19, 26 March 2020).

Despite need, we have identified that only 61% of our citizens eligible for Healthy Start, have actually registered to receive the vitamins and vouchers and we feel that this could be addressed if there were less barriers to overcome. We welcome the recent changes to the Healthy Start registration system, where those eligible no longer have to have the signature of a health professional. We do feel however, that more could be done to ensure Birmingham's most vulnerable citizens and other vulnerable parents/carers and children across England are getting the food and vitamin support they need at this crucial time in their early years.

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We are writing to you directly, to request a meeting at your earliest convenience to discuss and agree potential steps that we could take towards a solution to this Nationwide problem. This could involve eligible citizens being automatically registered as they engage with the benefit system through colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). We feel that it would be helpful for the benefit registration processes to include Healthy Start, not only in order to avoid the difficulties of registering by paper/post but to ultimately increase the uptake in the Healthy Start offer, improving outcomes for our families who are struggling.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "P. A. Hamilton". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Councillor Paulette Hamilton
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health
Chair of Birmingham Health and Wellbeing Board