



**One Parent
Families Scotland**

changing lives, challenging poverty



Welfare Foods – a consultation on meeting the needs of children and families in Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland Submission

June 2018

One Parent Families Scotland

OPFS is Scotland's national single parent organisation. We provide expert information, advice & family support, along with training activities, employability programmes & flexible childcare, tailored to the needs of single parent families. Over 7,500 families received support from OPFS services in 2017.

OPFS model of transformational change has co-production at its centre through the active involvement of single parents as volunteers, peer mentors and as members of the board. Our approach enables single parents, the majority of whom are women, to build their self-esteem, confidence and skills, increasing parent's access to employment, training and education.

Single Parent Families

One quarter of Scottish families are single parent households. The Poverty and Inequality Commission, whose main role is to provide independent advice to Scottish Ministers on reducing poverty and inequality, has highlighted that 37% of all children in Scotland living in poverty live in a single parent family¹ and 94% of these single parents are women.

Furthermore, the most current government statistics show astonishingly that **49% of children in single parent families now live below the poverty line**.² A recent EHRC³ report highlights that by 2021 single parents and their children will lose a fifth of their income due to welfare reform - an average of £5,250 a year. The **predicted increase in the child poverty rate (after housing costs) for children in single parent households to over 62%** will have a devastating impact on the lives and prospects of so many children.

OPFS is very pleased to submit evidence to the Scottish Government consultation on '**Welfare Foods – a consultation on meeting the needs of children and families in Scotland**'⁴ as we fully recognise that for many families headed by a single parent, maintaining a healthy diet is a daily financial challenge, particularly in the context of punitive UK welfare reform. There is strong evidence of the impact of diet in children's early years and on their longer-term outcomes. A healthy and nourishing diet contributes to children's general health and welfare, it also crucial to their ability to learn.

Money for food is the key flexible item in the budget of low income households. This means that the quantity and quality of food purchased and consumed by families is the first to suffer at times of financial hardship such as an unexpected bill or cut in work. It is well documented that family members, particularly women, will go without food to ensure their children have enough. So, food poverty is a gender inequality issue too.

¹ <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice-Final-Version-23-February-2018.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201617>

³ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/cumulative-impact-assessment-report.pdf> p153

⁴ https://consult.gov.scot/health-protection/welfare-foods/user_uploads/sct0218087754-1_welfarefoods_p4.pdf

Welfare Foods – a consultation on meeting the needs of children and families in Scotland

Introduction

The powers over ‘Welfare Foods’ have been devolved to Scotland through provisions in the Scotland Act 2016. This consultation is asking how best to take forward these powers to better meet the needs of children and families in Scotland. Welfare Foods includes the current UK Healthy Start Vouchers and Nursery Milk Scheme.⁵ OPFS has been very active in contributing to the development of plans for Best Start Foods. We have been involved in the ‘Welfare Foods Working Group’ - a group of organisations who are working with the Scottish Government around the design and delivery of the new programme. Our role is to ensure the needs of single parents are considered during the design and delivery of the service. OPFS has encouraged and supported single parents to become involved in the Social Security Panels set up by Scottish Government whose members have fed into the development of one of the first devolved benefits to be implemented.

We have organised workshops to enable single parents to meet Scottish Government officials to give feedback on their experiences of the UK social security system and their views on a model which has dignity, respect and fairness at the centre. OPFS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the consultation which states that the new Best Start Grant (BSG) will include a system for Best Start Foods payment, formerly known as the UK Healthy Start Vouchers and that this will be delivered by the new Social Security Agency.

General Feedback

We welcome the change in terminology from ‘Welfare Foods’ to ‘Best Start Foods.’ The term ‘welfare foods’ sounds demeaning and has connotations of families receiving a ‘hand-out’. Research consistently demonstrates that low income households find it difficult to adopt healthy eating guidelines. Evidence shows that eating healthily is more expensive. Poor access to shops and inadequate storage and cooking facilities are also a factor for those on a low income - not lack of nutrition knowledge.

The consultation document states that Best Start Foods will be a sub-set of Best Start Grant, but not all, BSG recipients will also be entitled to Best Start Foods. We welcome the decision to increase the weekly value from £3.10 to £4.25 to help increase the contribution to the cost of providing fruit, vegetables and milk. However, our evidence below, highlights issues with eligibility criteria and this is detailed in the sections which follow.

A single application process for the new Best Start Foods and BSG will be a great improvement on the current system and agree that if the branding of the payments is linked this will make entitlements clearer from pregnancy through to children starting school. A single administrative process will provide opportunities for combining promotion of the schemes and has the potential to increase uptake and reduce duplication.

⁵ <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/>

Consultation Paper Questions

Q1. Eligibility & How can we increase the uptake and awareness of the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods?

Uptake of the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods should be automatically granted to those that are eligible for it, with information sent out along with confirmation of eligibility. However, if the scheme has to rely on people applying for BSG and BSF, then the application process should be simple and should be communicated in an accessible way to those eligible. The information should accompany a campaign that can highlight ways healthy eating can be done economically, with the awareness campaign aimed also at those involved with children (social workers, health professionals, etc).

We feel that the increase from £3.10 a week to £4.15 a week is still too low. While £4.15 is a welcome increase we feel to take account of any ongoing increasing costs of fruit and veg the payment should be linked to the Retail Price Index to ensure it is keeping up with inflation costs. Fresh fruit and vegetables are expensive to buy. The scheme has expanded to include tinned and dried fruit and vegetables and pulses, however the financial pressures on families with young children is immense and this is an opportunity to invest early within in the context of a preventative approach.

There should be a campaign aimed at informing those who are eligible for the scheme along with JCP in Scotland as well as information cascaded through early years providers, NHS staff and third sector. A campaign to promote the uptake, targeted in venues that pregnant woman and mothers attending i.e. G.P surgeries but also in local community venues and adverts in the shops who will be taking part in the scheme.

There should be an automatic award system but this will be difficult to administer as the two parts of the Best Start Foods while linked have different entitlement. It will also be difficult to have a joined-up approach to include Best Start Grants as entitlement for Best Start Foods is from confirmation of pregnancy compared to 10 weeks before due date which ties up with the social security system.

We feel that the criteria for entitlement is too restricted and is inconsistent i.e. entitlement to Best Start Foods under Universal Credit has an income limit of £610 per month while the Healthy Start Vitamins has an income limit of £408 per month. Eligibility criteria also differs from Best Start Grants which it is proposed that qualification by UC should be an award of more than £0 in the month before or the month in which the application is made.

OPFS would propose that eligibility criteria to the suite of Best Start Benefits & Foods should be streamlined with access to all being based on receipt of Universal Credit. We also believe that maternity allowance should also be a qualifying benefit where the claimant does not have a partner. Maternity allowance is generally paid to women in low paid, insecure employment during the maternity period. If these women are single and not eligible to receive help with housing costs (and therefore not in receipt of UC or HB) they would not currently be eligible for a Best Start Grant.

We also think recipient of Council Tax Reduction should be a qualifying benefit. We still see in work poverty in families who don't get UC and at moment don't get HB but get CTR. This would take into account students and families affected by the Benefit Cap.

We appreciate the arguments given for more means- testing generally reflect a concern with efficiency, the wellbeing of the most disadvantaged, and fairness. However, what we know about means testing is that it tends not to be efficient, fair or in the interests of the most disadvantaged. One of the great strengths of universal benefits is that it is simple and economical to administer and operate and does reach the people whose needs are greatest. We understand that universal access to Best Start Grants and Foods is not an option on the table but a system which removes a complex mishmash of eligibility criteria would increase uptake and simplify administration as well as reduce operating costs.

Q2. What can we do to make the smartcard system as easy to use as possible?

The new system of Smartcards should make it easier to use as most supermarkets and shops have indicated that they will sign up for the system. This may help in some rural areas where they were having difficulty getting retailers to accept the vouchers.

A contactless system could be put in place that does not require the person using the card to have to explain what the card is for, thereby reducing the stigma that people can experience. However, the fact that the smartcard can only be used within certain supermarkets may prevent those coming from more isolated communities from being able to access the Best Start Foods Scheme. Many communities rely on local retailers due to poor and/or expensive transport links. There needs to be more thought put in to how this barrier can be overcome. Perhaps a reimbursement scheme can be put in place for harder to reach areas or the scheme can be expanded to include smaller retailers

Q3. How do we gather feedback to make improvements as the system develops?

Feedback could be gathered via ELC services and through practitioners involved with those benefiting from the scheme. Government could consult parents using the third sector as a route to parent involvement. Doing surveys - both on-line and paper, use of the expert panel and organisation like OPFS could organise feedback sessions directly with parents which would be independent of the government.

Q4. How can work creatively with retailers and others to make it easier for families to use Best Start Foods to improve their diet and nutrition?

By linking the whole Best Start system in a high profile campaign and doing roadshows at local supermarkets etc to get the attention of people at places they are likely to be rather than on government websites.

Raising awareness is key. Ideally, the campaign should form part of an overall healthy eating/healthy living campaign aimed at ALL families. Information should be provided on

how to make simple, healthy and nutritious food, with information given on the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods within participating retailers themselves.

Q5. What could an innovative programme that will support families to establish healthy eating patterns look like?

Healthy eating classes/ roadshows using the listed foods could encourage take up. Get a Scottish personality like a TV chef to promote the campaign or someone like Jack Munroe (@BootstrapCook) Offer meal recipe pack of cheap options to give better use of the £4.15 could encourage take up.

The campaign should have a large focus on how to make simple, healthy meals which can be portioned and used later. The focus should demonstrate how the BSF payment can be used to do this, in a simplified, easy to understand manner. The campaign should provide recipe ideas based on the nutritional values of the foods available to buy. Organisations who take part in the campaign could be encouraged to offer healthy eating classes, using the foods available.

Q6. What evidence could we gather about the impact?

Statistical reports from the system on the number of smartcard transactions, questionnaires from Early Learning Centres and third sector organisations would provide insight as to the impact it is having.

Obviously, the number of people using the scheme will provide an idea of the numbers of people buying more fruit and vegetables. There should also be evidence gathered from childcare practitioners who are sometimes best placed to measure the impact that it might be having on the development. Uptake of cooking classes and information from third sector organisations participating in the scheme would provide insight as well. Furthermore, feedback from healthcare professionals will provide further evidence of how well it is working.

Q7. Should the provision of children's vitamins be linked to eligibility for the new Best Start Foods (i.e. up to age of three)?

The provision of vitamins should be retained as it currently stands. While linking it to free meals in ELC's, children who do not attend need to be given easy access to vitamins.

The provision of vitamins should remain the same- that they should be provided free to all of those from pregnancy up to the age of four. Linking the benefits of taking vitamins with the BSF campaign would be good, however, changing this to an eligibility scheme seems pointless.

Q8. What do you think about the proposal to offer milk as part of the free meal offer for all children in ELC funded provision by 2020?

We think this can also only be of benefit and will add to the education of the benefits of eating fresh fruit and vegetables. OPFS currently provides healthy snacks for children and

the routine is part of the day for the children who look forward to their healthy snack. Children now ask for fruit as opposed to sweets.

There needs to be consideration for children who for one reason or another do not attend ELC's. It would be beneficial if they provided BOTH the meal offer and the food offer.

Q9. What are your views on the proposal to include an offer of a healthy snack to complement the free milk and meal offer for all children in early learning and childcare funded provision by 2020?

Giving health snacks will improve the chance of children eating a healthier diet as they will want to eat these foods from choice as they develop a taste for them.

Q10. We are interested in your views on how we can best support childcare providers to provide milk to children out with funded ELC entitlement. How could this work in practice without creating a costly administrative system?

If it was tied to the Best Start second payment the eligibility would already be in the system and could generate an award.

Q11. What are your views on the proposal to include an offer of a healthy snack for children out with funded ELC entitlement?

As stated above this would cover all children eligible for Best Start Grant.

Reaching Single Parents

In consultations with Single Parents we realise that the changes in the Social Security landscape will have a big impact on their everyday lives. Aside from the devastating impact of Westminster cuts to benefits and the introduction of Universal Credit parents have very little knowledge of what benefits are being devolved and so we predict OPFS will receive an increase in enquiries around Best Start as well as the other benefits as they are implemented. The changes have the potential to cause confusion and we would wish to support any moves to avoid increasing the complexity of the system. We are also keen to ensure single parents can access support with online access and digital skills to ensure they do not lose out on their entitlements.

OPFS participates in the Scottish Government's Social Security Communication and Engagement Partnership Group, which provides a network for the Scottish Government and its partners to ensure the newly devolved benefits reach all those entitled and who will be impacted by the new powers. As well as tailored communication to reach different target groups we will be making a strong case for good training for all Scottish Social Security staff. We all know that it so easily gets overlooked as time and budgets run out so the case for making it a robust, public requirement is all the greater.

OPFS welcomes the commitment that the Scottish Social Security Agency will treat those who use the service with dignity, respect and fairness. The Best Start suite of benefits will be the first trial of that assurance. We know from consultations that single parents feel they face a high level of judgemental attitudes and stigma and often this has been felt when they have engaged with JCP. We look forward to working with the new agency to ensure single parent families will always be treated with dignity and respect and that the agency will meet the expectations of the Social Security Charter when published.

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