



The UK Healthy Start Scheme – Evidence from Cardiff Shopping Observation and Research on Scheme Awareness

In Cardiff alone over £300 000 worth of Healthy Start vouchers are left unclaimed by those who would benefit from them

Around 40% of people eligible to claim Healthy Start vouchers in Powys don't take up the benefit

58% of retailers accepted vouchers for products not included in the Healthy Start Scheme

No retailers visited were visibly advertising the scheme

Knowledge and understanding of the scheme by frontline staff is low

1. Background

Food Cardiff is a city wide food partnership working across Cardiff to make healthy, affordable food accessible for all. As part of its five-year food security plan, [Building Resilience](#), Food Cardiff is working to optimise the Healthy Start scheme in the city to ensure all those that are eligible for Healthy Start food vouchers are able to access and spend them on eligible food items.

There are many challenges associated with the Healthy Start scheme ¹. Here we illustrate two of these which form part of wider Food Cardiff work programmes:

¹ The UK Healthy Start Scheme. What happened? What Next? First Steps Nutrition Trust, 2018.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5b8e2d0e575d1f6f1e5d2dcd/1536044307456/Healthy+Start+Report+for+web.pdf>

- The first is a **shopping observation exercise** which forms part of Cardiff's Veg City campaign supported by Sustainable Food Cities, to see if vouchers can be spent on ineligible items.
- The second forms part of our **optimizing family income work**, supported by Food Power, which involves establishing why 26% of those eligible for Healthy start vouchers are not accessing this scheme.

1.1. What is the Healthy Start Scheme?

[Healthy Start](#) replaced the previous welfare food scheme in 2006, to offer vouchers for cows' milk, fruit and vegetables or infant formula to pregnant under 18's and to low income pregnant women and families with children under 4 years of age. Women and families eligible for Healthy Start also receive coupons for free Healthy Start vitamin supplements.

Good nutrition in the first 1000 days of life, from conception through to a child's second birthday, is vital and has implications for the health of current and future generations ². The Healthy Start Scheme aims to act as a nutritional safety net and to support better eating habits in low-income women and families. Recent research from the [Food Foundation](#) ³ suggests that as many as 160,000 children in Wales live in households that cannot afford to purchase a healthy diet according to Government guidance (The Eatwell Guide) ⁴.

Healthy Start beneficiaries receive the following food vouchers:

- Pregnant women get one Healthy Start food voucher a week, worth £3.10.
- Babies under the age of 1 year get two vouchers a week, worth a total of £6.20.
- Children aged over 1 year and under 4 years get one voucher a week, worth £3.10.

In 2009, the value of Healthy Start food vouchers was increased from £2.80 to £3.10. There has been no further increase in their value between 2009 and 2018 despite the rising cost of food and infant formula milk, reducing purchasing power.

To receive the food vouchers, eligible families need to complete an application form and have this signed by a health professional. The qualifying criteria for Healthy Start can be found at www.healthystart.org.uk. If eligible, food vouchers are sent to the recipients' home once every four weeks along with their vitamin supplement coupons. Food vouchers can be used in participating retailers to buy, or to supplement payment for specific foods only: plain cow's milk (which can be fresh or UHT and with any fat content), plain fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables, or first cow's milk based infant formula (suitable from birth). Retailers must be registered with the scheme to accept and claim payment for the vouchers and can include national supermarkets, smaller retailers in markets, social pantries, milk deliverers, community

² Bhutta, Z.A. (2013). Early nutrition and adult outcomes: pieces of the puzzle. *The Lancet*. Volume 382, Issue: 9891 P486-487. <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2813%2960716-3>

³ Food Foundation (2018) Affordability of the UK's Eatwell Guide https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Affordability-of-the-Eatwell-Guide_Final_EMBARGOED-Version.pdf

⁴ Public Health England, 2016. The Eatwell Guide. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742750/Eatwell_Guide_booklet_2018v4.pdf

food co-operatives, independent or franchised retailers and pharmacies. The retailer retains vouchers redeemed and sends these to the Healthy Start Issuing Unit (HSIU) which then reimburses the full face value.

A guide for retailers can be found at <https://www.hsru.co.uk/SupplierGuide.pdf>. This document outlines the terms and conditions retailers must comply with as part of the scheme. Example of a voucher:



1.2. The National Picture

First Steps Nutrition¹ have estimated that the Healthy Start scheme was underspent by £41.6m. In the last year a considerable amount of local action and research across the UK has taken place to establish the barriers and solutions to the take up of Healthy Start vouchers. These were documented in a recent webinar held by Food Power and Sustainable Food Cities <http://sustainablefoodcities.org/webinars>

In figures 1 and 2 below, we can see in Wales the take up of Healthy Start food vouchers varies from 60.8% in Powys (39.2% of those eligible don't access this benefit), to 74% in Cardiff (26% not accessing benefit). The Wales average is 69%. For Cardiff alone we have estimated this to be in excess of **£300 000** underspend on the scheme, money which could be supporting those on a low income and supporting the local economy.

Healthy Start underspend in Cardiff – A snapshot in time January 2017

- 3779 individuals are eligible to receive food vouchers
- 2795 (74%) of individuals received vouchers so 984 individuals did not register to receive
- Each voucher is worth £3.10 per week
- The value of 984 beneficiaries not taking entitlement over one year (assuming 2 vouchers per beneficiary) = **£317,240**

This is likely to be an under estimate as some beneficiaries (children under 1) are entitled to 2 vouchers a week (£6.20) and some families may have more than one child under 4 and around 14% of the vouchers allocated remain unspent. (Data taken from DH/Serco Jan 17)

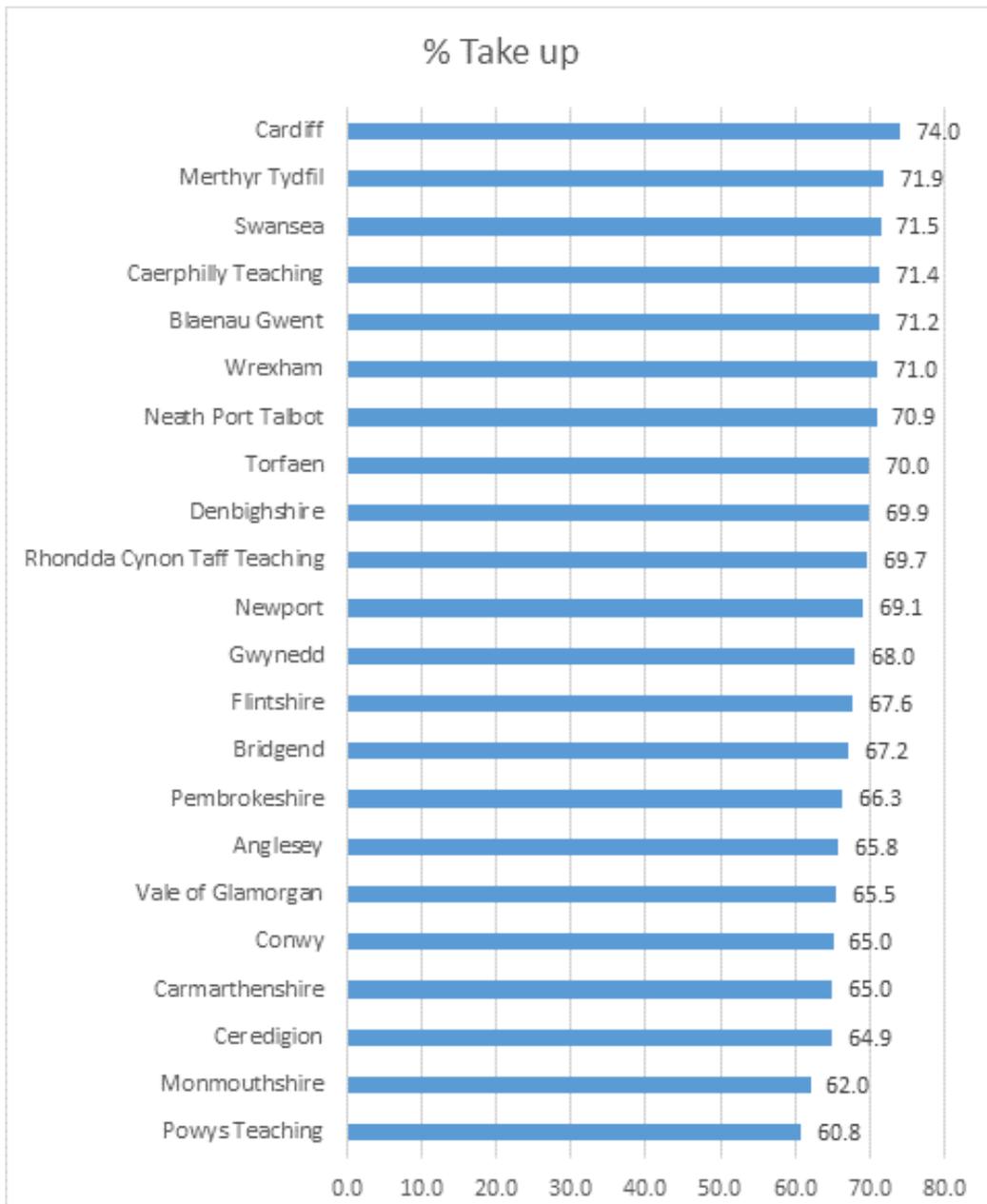


Figure 1. Percentage take up of Healthy Start vouchers from those eligible by Local Authority (DH/Serco snapshot Jan 17)

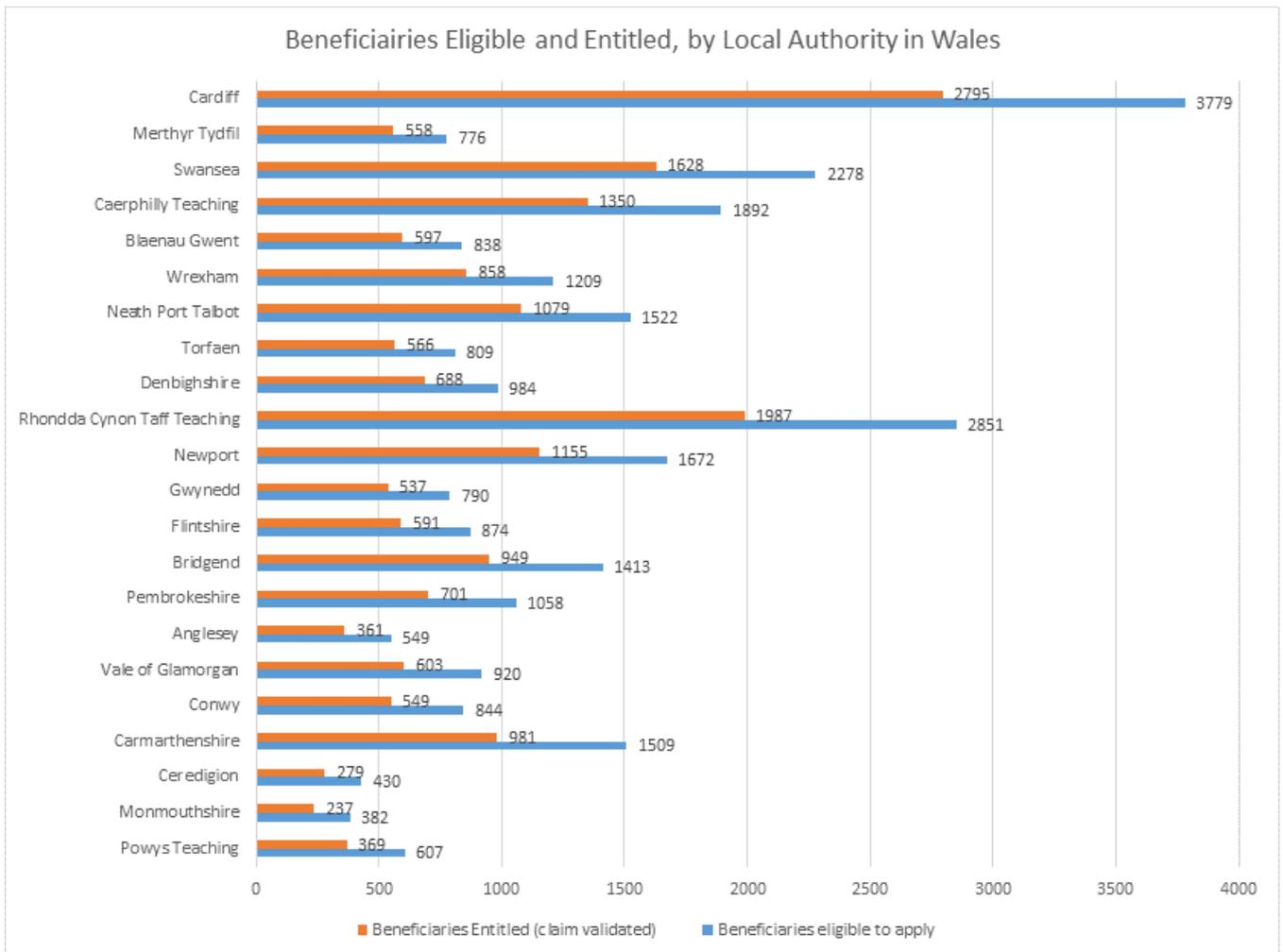


Figure 2. Beneficiaries eligible for Healthy Start (claim verified) vs Entitled (those eligible to apply) (Data from DH/Serco snapshot Jan 17)

2. Shopping Observation Exercise in Cardiff

2.1 Are Healthy Start vouchers open to misuse?

The current voucher re-imburement system does not have the capability to monitor what Healthy Start food vouchers are redeemed for. Research commissioned by the Department of Health in 2012⁵ explored the views of staff in a range of locations and retail establishments across England who accepted the vouchers to understand more about how they were used. The research found that the scheme was working well overall, and misuse of vouchers appeared rare. The sample size was small, at just 79 in total. However, recently there have been anecdotal reports from families and professionals in Cardiff of vouchers being accepted for items outside of the scheme.

⁵ Department of Health (2012). Healthy Start: Retailer Research Summary. London: Department of Health. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216866/DH-template-retailer-research-FINAL1.pdf

In August-September 2018, Food Cardiff carried out research on behalf of Welsh Government to explore the customer experience of using Healthy Start vouchers, to find out if vouchers can be used for goods not included in the Healthy Start scheme and to observe how the scheme is advertised by local retailers.

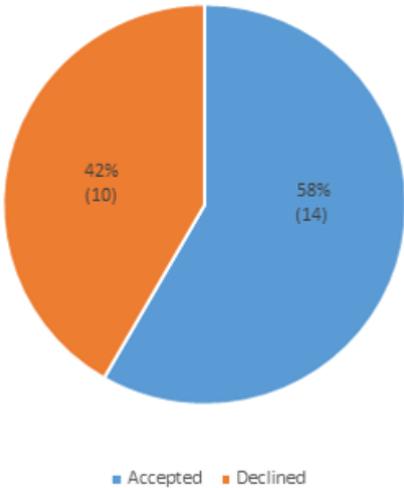
2.2 Process:

- £150 worth of Healthy Start vouchers were purchased through Welsh Government for the specific use of this exercise.
- A list of 24 retailers accepting Healthy Start vouchers was drawn up, to include both large/national retailers and small/local retailers, across the most deprived communities in Cardiff.
- Up to two vouchers (£6.20) were used for each visit.
- Findings were documented on a standard form by all staff members involved.
- Items purchased were donated to local food banks and Flying Start families.

2.3 Key Findings and Observations:

- Over half of the retailers visited (58%, 14/24) accepted vouchers for products not included in the Healthy Start scheme.

Figure 3. Retailers accepting or declining the vouchers for invalid items.



Of the 24 retailers, 14 were large/national retailers, and 10 small/local retailers. Both the large and small retailers accepted approximately the same proportion of vouchers for invalid items. See Figure 4 below:

Figure 4. Percentage of Large/national retailers and small/local retailers accepting vouchers for invalid items.



Table 1: Examples of items purchased that are not part of the Healthy Start scheme.

Milks	Infant formula milks (other than first milks suitable from birth)	'Baby' products and foods	Other food products	Other drinks
Strawberry flavoured milk	Growing up milk (powdered and readymade) – suitable from 1 year.	Baby carrot stick crisps	Raisins	Sports drink
Soya milk	Follow on infant formula milk – suitable from 6 months.	Baby food jars and pouches	Frozen broccoli and cauliflower cheese	Bottled water
Milkshake		Baby porridge	Spaghetti hoops	Cherry Pepsi Max
Milkshake powder		Rusks	Oven fries	Squash
Evaporated milk		Baby wipes	Tinned fruit in syrup	Smoothies
		Cotton wool	Tinned fruit in juice	Fruit juice
		Nappy bags		

2.4 Further observations:

2.4.1 Advertisement of the scheme

There was no advertisement of the scheme in any of the retail establishments visited.

2.4.2 Nutritional content of accepted items

Some of the non-permitted items purchased were high in sugar (i.e. sports drinks, cherry Pepsi Max, squash, tinned fruit in syrup) or high in fat (i.e. broccoli and cauliflower cheese). This

conflicts with the healthy eating ethos of the scheme. In some stores visited, there was a limited number of valid items available to purchase.

2.4.3 Staff knowledge of the Healthy Start Scheme

- Some staff were unfamiliar with the vouchers and had to check with colleagues/management before use.
- Some staff thoroughly read the vouchers and still accepted them for ineligible items.
- Some staff accepted the vouchers even though they were unfamiliar with the scheme.

2.4.4 Accepting vouchers for their full face value

- A few retailers would not accept the full face value of the vouchers.
- Some shops asked that the full voucher amount be spent, whilst others allowed part of the voucher value to be redeemed (but no change was given as per the scheme terms and conditions).
- Other retailers deducted the full voucher amount when a low value valid item (£1) was in with the shopping, thus meaning the remaining voucher value went on products not in the scheme

2.4.5 Till systems

- It was easier to purchase ineligible items via manned tills as opposed to self-service checkouts.
- It appeared easier for shop staff to decline the vouchers (for ineligible items) when the decision was made automatically by the till. Observers felt shop assistants were being helpful and empathetic when allowing the purchase of ineligible items.

2.4.6 Good Practice Observed

- Staff were generally very helpful and pleasant when declining vouchers for ineligible items.
- In a couple of particular stores, staff were very knowledgeable about the Healthy Start scheme and confident in explaining eligible products.
- The system worked well where vouchers could be scanned at self-service check outs and accepted/rejected

3. Optimizing family income – Healthy Start

It has been identified that awareness of the Healthy Start scheme in front line services is patchy. An opportunity within the money advice function of Cardiff Council has been identified to improve this. Three areas for improvement were identified:

- a) Training all money advice staff at Cardiff Council and the possibility of working with other agencies to do the same (e.g. Citizens Advice).
- b) Introducing a Healthy Start question during client interviews if parents are eligible to claim Free School Meals for their children and/or they have children under the age of 4 or are pregnant.

c) Developing some resources to signpost clients to the Health Start scheme.

In addition, we plan to carry out a “food scheme survey” to assess how many people are not aware of the Healthy Start scheme, in conjunction with other food schemes (e.g. breakfast club) and share resources throughout Flying Start centres.

4. Conclusions

This research highlights the need to support retailers in the implementation of the Healthy Start voucher scheme (through in store promotion, staff training and technology) and front line staff in the promotion of the scheme.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Present findings to the Food Cardiff Partnership and build on the areas for improvement outlined in section 3. A second report will be produced in Spring 2019 detailing the work on optimizing family income.

5.2 Share findings with the Welsh Retail Consortium and the Association of Convenience Stores to encourage retailer action.

5.3 Discuss the findings with Welsh Government in the context of the wider welfare food review.

5.4 Share findings through Food Power and Sustainable Food Cities networks to add to the body of evidence being gathered.

5.5 Use findings to feed in recommendations to the forthcoming consultation on the Healthy Start scheme from the Department of Health.

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