



Reducing infant and maternal food insecurity in the UK

November 2024¹

[The Independent Food Aid Network \(IFAN\)](#) supports and advocates on behalf of independent food aid providers operating across the UK including hundreds of independent food banks. IFAN campaigns for a 'cash first' or income-focused approach to the drivers of food bank use and wider food insecurity. The network envisions a country without the need for charitable food aid where adequate and nutritious food is affordable for all.

Introduction:

Latest data from The Food Foundation show that in June 2024, 13.6% households reported they had experienced food insecurity in the last month.² Of households with children, 18% reported food insecurity in the past month compared to 11.7% of households without children. It is clear that households with children are disadvantaged in relation to the cost of living. Furthermore, this food insecurity data show that of all households with children and single adult households are further disadvantaged. Food insecurity is reported in 31.4% of these households compared to 15.9% of multi-adult households. In May 2024, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) reported that 4.3 million children were living in poverty.³

Reducing child poverty has been a clear priority for the new Labour Government.⁴ Many have been hopeful that a first action would be the removal of the two-child limit and the devastating impact it has on low-income families with more than two children.⁵ As of the end of October 2024, 12,500 children have been pulled into poverty by the two-child limit since the Labour Government took office.⁶ Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) statistics show that one in nine children in the UK live in a household impacted by the two-child limit.⁷ The establishment of the Child Poverty Taskforce and the planned publication of a child poverty strategy by the

¹ IFAN has previously reported on infant food insecurity in: [Reducing food insecurity in households with infants](#), December 2023, [Reducing food insecurity in UK households with infant children](#), April 2023, and [Reducing infant and maternal food insecurity in Scotland](#), March 2023

² [The Food Foundation: Food Insecurity Tracking](#), June 2024 (Round 15)

³ [Child Poverty Action Group: Ending child poverty is urgent, and it is possible](#), May 2024

⁴ [Labour party manifesto 2024: Break down barriers to opportunity](#)

⁵ [The Guardian: Labour has power at last. Will it use it to scrap the inhumane two-child benefit cap?](#), July 2024

⁶ [Child Poverty Action Group: Scottish child poverty campaigners join UK-wide call on Chancellor to scrap two child limit in coming Budget](#), October 2024

⁷ [Department for Work and Pensions: Official statistics. Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit claimants: statistics related to the policy to provide support for a maximum of two children. April 2024](#), July 2024

Spring of next year does offer some room for hope.⁸ However, as the two-child limit was not scrapped in the Autumn Budget, it's estimated that 16,000 more children will be pulled into poverty while we wait for the publication of the Child Poverty Taskforce's strategy.⁹ Scrapping the two-child limit would lift 300,000 children out of poverty at a cost of £1.7 billion.¹⁰

Against the backdrop of rising child poverty figures, media attention has been sharply focused on infant food insecurity, and particularly the extortionate cost of infant formula. The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published data on the infant formula market in February 2024.¹¹ The CMA found that between March 2021 and April 2023, the price of infant formula increased by 25%. Following a period of investigation, a recent CMA interim report outlines lack of price regulation, lack of information among professionals and parents and carers, as well as lack of competition on the market as reasons behind the distorted infant formula market.¹² First Steps Nutrition Trust (FSNT) have fed into the market research extensively and continued to provide invaluable, up-to-date, price monitoring data and analysis on the market to expose company profiteering.^{13 14}

Some women struggle to breastfeed because they are not able to afford an adequate diet due to food insecurity.¹⁵ Over half of infants in England are fed either wholly or partially with infant formula during their first 12 months.¹⁶ This leaves many low-income parents and carers with no other option but to find a way to purchase or acquire infant formula. Recent research from Newcastle University found that food insecure pregnant women are four times more likely to have poor mental health, experience anxiety, stress and depression.¹⁷ A study published in Obesity Reviews found that food insecure pregnant women also have a higher risk of developing obesity, diabetes, and dental problems, all which can put their babies at risk.¹⁸

In England and Wales, the Healthy Start scheme seeks to ensure that pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, babies, and young children can access adequate and nutritious diets. However, the monetary allowance does not match food inflation,

⁸ [Department for Work and Pensions: Child Poverty Taskforce kicks off urgent work to publish strategy in spring](#), August 2024

⁹ [Child Poverty Action Group: Chancellor misses golden chance to scrap two child limit](#), October 2024

¹⁰ [Child Poverty Action Group: Things will only get worse: Why the two-child limit must go](#), July 2024

¹¹ [This is Money: CMA shuns 'in-depth' probe into infant formula market](#), August 2024

¹² [CMA: Infant formula and follow-on formula market study](#), November 2024

¹³ [First Steps Nutrition Trust: Statement on infant formula and follow-on formula market study interim report from the Competition and Markets Authority \(CMA\)](#), November 2024

¹⁴ [First Steps Nutrition Trust: Cost of infant formula, follow-on formula and milks marketed as foods for special medical purposes available over the counter in the UK](#), November 2024

¹⁵ [FEED UK: The impact of food insecurity on infant feeding in the UK](#), October 2024

¹⁶ [Office for Health Improvement and Disparities: Breastfeeding at 6 to 8 weeks after birth: annual data April 2022 to March 2023](#), updated August 2024

¹⁷ [Newcastle University: Unaffordable food putting mums-to-be at risk](#), September 2024

¹⁸ [Obesity Reviews: Food insecurity during pregnancy in high-income countries, and maternal weight and diet: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#), May 2024

the cost of living, nor the cost of infant formula. The value of Healthy Start was last increased in April 2021 from £3.10 to its current level of £4.25.^{19 20} Its stagnant value as compared to the rising cost of food prevents this tool from being effective at supporting low-income families.²¹ The take-up of Healthy Start vouchers is also low and calls for auto-enrolment have not yet been heeded.

In Scotland, the Best Start Foods scheme can help parents and carers buy milk or fruit during pregnancy until the child is 3 years old.²² The weekly value of the scheme is £5.30 and in February 2024 the income threshold element of the eligibility criteria was removed to widen access to the scheme.^{23 24} Best Start Foods is one of the five family payments available through Social Security Scotland and it is available for people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).²⁵

It's crucial to continue highlighting the scale and depth of infant food insecurity, but it's more important than ever that parents and carers of infants can access adequate incomes and that this is the primary focus of policy makers. This cohort of people is presenting at food banks because they don't have enough money to afford essentials. In the long term, parents and carers need more money in their pockets through adequate social security payments and secure and fairly paid work as well as adequate and accessible crisis support via cash payments allowing dignity and choice at local authority level.

However, there is no doubt that the situation can be improved in the here and now with a focus on developing and supporting emergency infant feeding pathways at local authority level. These need to prioritise income maximisation, autonomy, and dignity and choice regarding cash payments for the purchase of infant formula and to enable breastfeeding mothers to afford adequate nutrition.

Latest IFAN data:

Recent indicative data show that IFAN independent food banks continue to struggle to cope with demand and depleted food and financial donations alongside reduced surplus food supply.²⁶ However, most households reporting severe food insecurity do not access a food bank. Latest Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Family Resources Survey data from 2022-23 reflects this – only 14% of households reporting severe food insecurity accessed a food bank over a 30-day period.²⁷

¹⁹ [House of Commons Library: Healthy Start scheme and increases in the cost of living](#), May 2023

²⁰ From birth to the child's first birthday the weekly allowance is double – £8.50

²¹ [The Food Foundation: Nourishing the nation: Healthy Start and fruit and veg](#), April 2024

²² [Scottish Government: Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods - how it works](#)

²³ From birth to the child's first birthday the weekly allowance is double – £10.60

²⁴ [Social Security Scotland: Changes to Best Start Foods - information for advice organisations](#), February 2024

²⁵ [Migration Scotland: Public funds for immigration purposes](#)

²⁶ [IFAN: Data](#)

²⁷ [Department for Work and Pensions: Family Resources Survey](#), updated March 2024

IFAN ran a survey of member organisations in August 2024 including questions on supporting parents and carers who were struggling to feed infants.²⁸ Nearly a quarter of contributing food aid organisations, based in England and Scotland had seen a rise in the number of parents and carers who had asked for support to feed their babies from April to July 2024 compared with the same period in 2023. Nearly half of organisations reported that the need they were seeing had remained the same comparing those two four-month periods. Previous data collated from a different cohort of IFAN independent food banks and published in December 2023, found that 43% of contributing organisations had seen a rise in the number of parents and carers who had asked for support to feed their infants comparing April to July 2023 to the same period in 2022.²⁹

Inadequate cash first advice and support result in parents and carers having to access food banks:

60% of IFAN member organisations responding to IFAN's latest survey reported supporting parents and carers who had self-referred to their service.³⁰ It's clear that parents and carers are missing vital pathways to support and advice to maximise income as well as to access cash payments or shopping vouchers/gift cards to purchase infant formula or food if breastfeeding, resulting in having to resort to charitable food aid. What's more, even if benefiting from income maximisation advice and support, families are too often still unable to get by without the help of a food bank.

UNICEF guidance on supporting families with infants under 12 months recommends that food banks 'refer families to their Local Authority or Health Board to ensure they receive ongoing, wrap-around support'.³¹ However, health visitors, local authorities, and advice agencies continue to refer parents and carers to local food banks for support, creating a grey area in which parents/carers and infants are struggling. 48% of independent food banks reported that parents and carers had received a referral through a health visitor, 45% through an advice agency, nearly 43% through their local authority, and 36% through another health practitioner such as a GP. Nearly three quarters of independent food bank respondents reported not being aware of local authority guidance and local pathways on supporting people with infant children facing food insecurity.

²⁸ 80 independent food aid providers operating 155 venues including 149 food banks and 6 food pantries from 90 different local authorities contributed to the survey. Most organisations responded to questions relating to infant food insecurity.

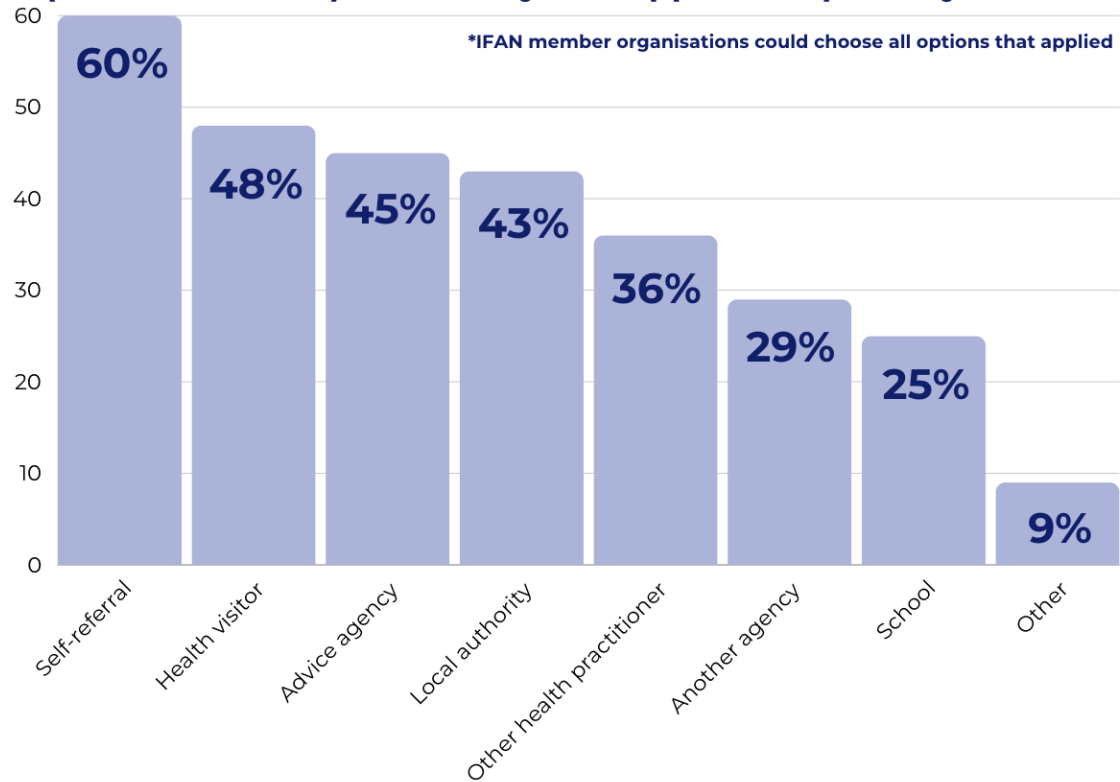
²⁹ 95 organisations operating 196 independent food banks from 89 different local authorities contributed to the survey. Most organisations responded to questions relating to infant food insecurity.

³⁰ See *Figure 1*

³¹ [UNICEF: Supporting families with infants under 12 months experiencing food insecurity – a guide for local authorities and health boards](#)

Figure 1: IFAN survey August 2024: How parents and carers with babies (0-12 month olds) accessed support in April-July 2024

IFAN survey August 2024: How have parents/carers with babies (0-12 month olds) accessed your support in April-July 2024?*



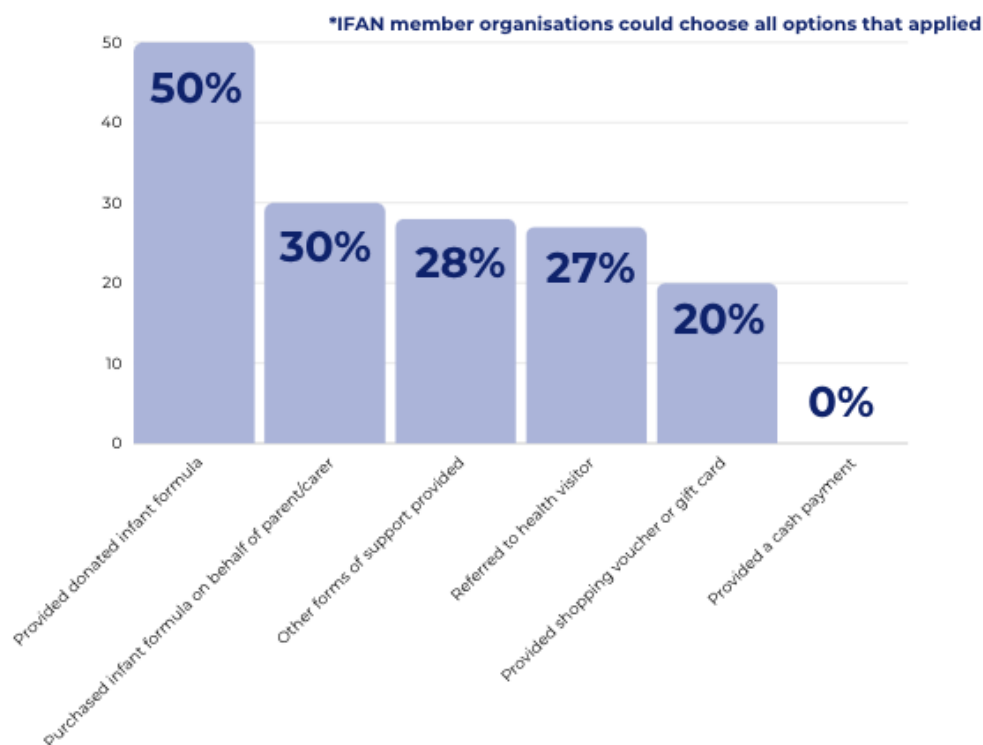
How independent food bank teams have supported parents and carers:

Independent food bank teams have supported parents and carers to access infant formula in a variety of ways. Most commonly organisations reported providing parents and carers with donated formula directly. They also purchased required infant formula on behalf of the parents and carers, provided other types of support, referred parents and carers to a health visitor, and provided shopping cards or gift vouchers for the purchase of infant formula.³²

³² See Figure 2

Figure 2: IFAN Survey August 2024: How organisations provided support to parents and carers with babies

IFAN survey August 2024: Ways in which food bank teams have supported parents/carers with babies (0-12 month olds) in April-July 2024?*



Improving local cash first referral pathways:

A charitable food aid response to poverty has proved itself to be neither effective nor sustainable. The distribution of millions of emergency food parcels has not reduced food insecurity despite the efforts of armies of volunteers.^{33 34} Low-income families are missing out on up to approximately £3,235 per child per year all while the level of financial hardship they are under is increasing and limiting their access to necessities.^{35 36} Poverty and food insecurity are impacting the mental and physical health of children as well as parents and carers living in poverty. No one should ever have to resort to using a food bank, and parents and carers can be hesitant to let anyone know they are experiencing food insecurity because they are fearful of repercussions or potentially having their children taken away.³⁷

³³ [IFAN: Data](#)

³⁴ [Big Issue: Food banks can take hope from election result – if Labour takes action before another tough winter](#), July 2024

³⁵ [Resolution Foundation: Catastrophic gaps](#), January 2024

³⁶ [Nesta: Lost opportunities: parent's perspective on how the two-child limit policy is affecting their children's early development](#), April 2024

³⁷ [BBC: Struggling parent too scared to ask for free baby milk – charity](#), February 2024

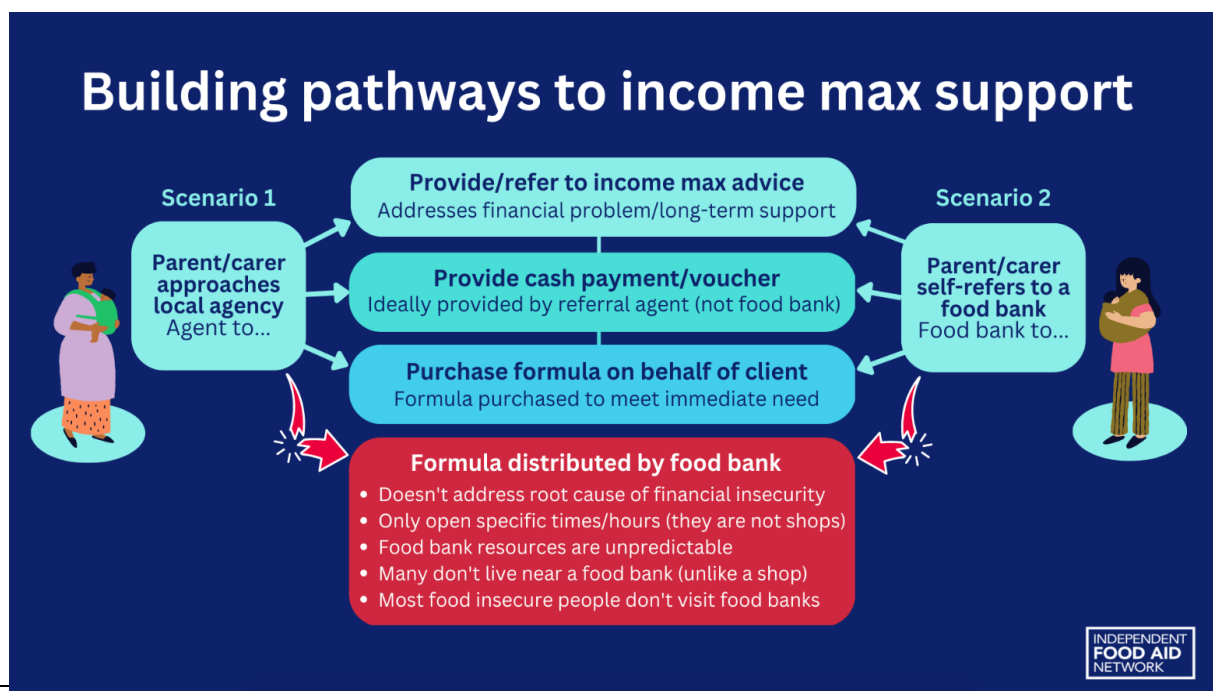
The Scottish Government published their plan Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland in 2023 outlining their commitment to a cash first approach to food insecurity.³⁸ In addition to the plan, the Scottish Government is looking to strengthen local infant food insecurity emergency pathways through cross-sector partnerships and has co-developed a guide for local authorities and health boards on creating local emergency pathways – responding to need and preventing crisis.³⁹ This collaborative project aims to better understand the scale and nature of infant food insecurity in Scotland, provide a framework for best practice at a local level, and build a picture of local responses currently in place.

IFAN recommendations to reduce infant and maternal food insecurity in the UK:

Collaborate to ensure parents and carers struggling to feed infants are supported through a cash first approach

IFAN is calling for local agencies and partners to collaboratively strengthen referral pathways towards income maximisation. It’s vital a cash first response is prioritised when helping parents and carers in urgent need of infant formula or mothers who are struggling to breastfeed due to inadequate income to purchase food. Parents and carers who reach out for support should ideally be provided with advice and help to maximise income using tools like IFAN’s ‘Worrying About Money?’ leaflets. This advice and support would include how to access cash payments or shopping vouchers/gift cards in the first instance in order to purchase infant formula or food to meet immediate need.

Figure 3: IFAN: Building pathways to income maximisation support



³⁸ [Scottish Government: Cash-First – towards ending the need for food banks in Scotland: plan](#), June 2023

³⁹ [Scottish Government: Infant food insecurity – responding and preventing: guide](#), February 2024

Promote and invest in local advice services to help embed early cash first interventions

Adequately funded local advice services are fundamental to cash first referral pathways. Local advice services are increasingly overstretched and under-resourced across communities in the UK.⁴⁰ IFAN has been co-developing and disseminating 'Worrying About Money?' leaflets alongside local partners in Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland since 2020.⁴¹ These straightforward resources help people experiencing financial crises and support workers and volunteers identify local cash first advice and support services. IFAN also offers Money Counts training to support health visitors and other support workers in direct contact with parents and carers struggling to feed their infants.⁴²

Bring social security payments and wages in line with the cost of living and ensure everyone can access a Living Income

Even after people have accessed advice and support to maximise income, this will often still not be enough to enable people to afford bare essentials. Social security payments must be brought in line with the cost of living. It's increasingly clear that cash first or income-focused interventions are effective in reducing food insecurity. According to DWP data, the temporary £20-a-week uplift to Universal Credit decreased severe and moderate food insecurity by 16%.⁴³

In Scotland, increases to the Scottish Child Payment have resulted in a decline in need for food bank support amongst families and more interventions like this one are needed in Scotland and the rest of the UK.⁴⁴

Low wages and insecure work are key drivers of food insecurity. According to polling from the Living Wage Foundation, 39% of low paid workers reported that they were 'regularly skipping meals for financial reasons and falling behind on household bills'.⁴⁵ It's vital that a real Living Wage is paid by employers.⁴⁶ Zero-hour contracts also drive severe food insecurity and the Labour Government's commitment to ban 'exploitative zero-hour contracts' is welcome.^{47 48}

⁴⁰ [Financial Times: Record number of UK households seek help with cost-of-living issues](#), November 2023

⁴¹ [IFAN: 'Worrying About Money?' leaflets](#)

⁴² IFAN offers Money Counts training linked to the local 'Worrying About Money?' leaflets for frontline support workers and organisations. The one-hour training session, online or in person, helps the attendees gain confidence in starting conversations about money worries with people facing financial hardship. These sessions also help promote the 'Worrying About Money?' leaflets across sectors as a tool to signpost people to advice and support.

⁴³ [Department for Work and Pensions: Family Resources Survey: financial year 2019 to 2020](#), March 2021

⁴⁴ [Fraser of Allander Institute: Impact of the Scottish Child Payment on the need for food banks](#), May 2024

⁴⁵ [Living Wage Foundation: Life on low pay as inflation begins to ease](#), September 2023

⁴⁶ [Living Wage Foundation: What is the real Living Wage?](#)

⁴⁷ [IFAN: Data](#)

⁴⁸ [DWP: Government unveils significant reforms to employment rights](#), updated October 2024

It's critical that increasing incomes, whether through social security payments or wages, is prioritised. IFAN is calling for a Living Income and a Healthy Standard of Living for all.⁴⁹ An Essentials Guarantee would be an important stepping stone towards these goals.⁵⁰

Ensure the availability of crisis support via cash payments

Crisis support via cash payments is available in every local authority in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland through the Scottish Welfare Fund (Scotland), Discretionary Assistance Fund (Wales), and Discretionary Support (Northern Ireland). Crisis support varies across local authorities in England.⁵¹ Many local authorities do not have a local crisis support scheme in place, and when there is one it doesn't necessarily provide cash payments. Notwithstanding the availability of crisis payments in devolved nations, people facing financial crises often face barriers when trying to access cash first support in a crisis.⁵²

Even if a parent or carer can access cash payments, there may still be a need to access a food bank if that support is insufficient or is not provided quickly enough. It's vital that all UK local authorities provide crisis support via cash payments and that this support is adequate, timely, and accessible.

Improve access to and adequacy of Healthy Start and Best Start schemes

The Healthy Start scheme provides low-income families support in accessing better diets however the scheme faces challenges such as low uptake, restrictive eligibility criteria as well as the stagnant value when compared to the increased cost of food and infant formula. The value of Healthy Start needs to urgently be brought in line with inflation and cost of living to achieve its purpose of enabling families to access adequate nutrition during pregnancy and first years of life.

The eligibility criteria should be expanded to include all families on Universal Credit and equal benefits with children under 5 years old as recommended by the National Food Strategy.⁵³ Additionally, the Government should work together with healthcare professionals and commit to promoting the scheme to eligible families as recommended by the National Food Strategy. Furthermore, resolving data sharing issues between DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care to inform all eligible families and provide them with an equal opportunity to apply for the scheme.

⁴⁹ [Institute of Health and Equity: Ensure healthy standard of living for all](#)

⁵⁰ [Trussell: Guarantee our essentials](#)

⁵¹ [End Furniture Poverty: Rebuilding Crisis Support – Local Welfare Assistance](#)

⁵² [Scottish Government: Scottish Welfare Fund review](#), March 2023

⁵³ [National Food Strategy](#)

The Government should also permanently expand the eligibility of the scheme to children in families with NRPF, to follow through with a promise from 2021.⁵⁴

An auto-enrolment system should be utilised to address low uptake of the scheme, raise awareness, eradicate barriers to application and stigma for the Healthy Start scheme.⁵⁵ The Scottish Government is leading by example by auto-enrolling any child in receipt of Scottish Child Payment for the Best Start Grant's Early Learning Payment and School Age Payment however this should also be applied to Best Start Foods as well as the first of the three Best Start Grant's payments, Pregnancy and Baby, which currently require an application.⁵⁶ Promotion of the availability of Best Start Foods as well as Best Start Grants is vital to maximise access and uptake of the schemes.⁵⁷

However, above all, ideally people would not need to access either scheme but could instead afford essentials including infant formula through adequate wages and social security payments.⁵⁸

Take a cash first approach when providing immediate support

Given the current context it's inevitable that food banks and other charitable food aid will need to provide direct and immediate support to parents and carers struggling to afford infant formula. IFAN recommends that food banks and other food aid providers refer to the [UNICEF Local Authority guidance](#) alongside [FEED UK guidance on the provision of infant formula](#). These guidelines can help organisations to prioritise pathways to cash first and advice while supporting people in the short-term.

Contact:

Sabine Goodwin, Director of the Independent Food Aid Network
sabine@foodaidnetwork.org.uk | 07971-010-991 | www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk
Twitter: @IFAN_UK

⁵⁴ [Gold Jennings Solicitors: Briefing note: extension to the Healthy Start scheme to British children under the age of 4 from NRPF families](#), June 2021

⁵⁵ [The Food Foundation: More than 200,000 missing out on access to nutritious food](#), June 2023

⁵⁶ [Scottish Government: Scottish Child Payment - Other benefits you might be able to get](#)

⁵⁷ [National Centre for Social Research: Evaluation of Best Start Foods - qualitative research](#)

⁵⁸ [First Steps Nutrition Trust: Cost of infant formula, follow-on formula and milks marketed as foods for special purposes available over the counter in the UK](#), November 2024

Breakdown of IFAN Survey – August 2024

Table 1 – Level of support provided to parents/carers to feed their babies (0-12 month olds) in April – July 2024 compared to April – July 2023 as reported by 80 organisations operating 155 venues, including independent food banks, pantries and other food aid services

Supporting parents/carers to feed babies (0-12 month olds)	No of organisations
Level of support has remained approximately the same	42
Increased level for support	19
Not sure	14
Other	3
Decreased level of support	2

Table 2 – 78 organisations operating 153 venues, including independent food banks, pantries and other food aid services, reported on the number of parents/carers who have requested support to feed their babies (0-12 month olds) in April – July 2024.

Number of parents/carers with babies who requested support	No of organisations
0	4
1-5	18
6-10	11
11-15	3
16-20	7
More than 20	10
Not sure	25

Table 3 – Ways in which parents/carers with babies have accessed support as reported by 75 organisations operating 151 venues, including independent food banks, pantries and other food aid services. Organisations could report any number of options.

Referral avenue	No of organisations
Self-referral	45
Health visitor	36
Local Authority	34
Advice agency	32
Health Practitioner (GP, health visitor)	27
Another agency	22
School	19
Other	7

Table 4 – Ways in which organisations have supported parents/carers with babies as reported by 74 organisations operating 147 venues, including independent food banks, pantries and other food aid service. Organisations could report any number of reasons.

Provided support	No of organisations
Providing donated infant formula	37
Purchased required infant formula on behalf of person seeking support	22
Other	21
Referring people to a health visitor	20

Providing a voucher	15
Providing cash	0

Table 5 – Level of awareness of local guidance regarding supporting food insecure families with babies as reported by 79 organisations operating 154 venues, including independent food banks, pantries and other food aid service.

Level of awareness	No of organisation
No	59
Yes	20