



Healthy Start

Retailer research summary

Background

The Healthy Start scheme is designed to help low-income pregnant women and families with children under four buy liquid cows milk, plain fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables and infant formula milk.

Over 15,000 retail businesses (across 30,000 retail outlets) are registered to accept Healthy Start vouchers. Every four weeks 2.6 million Healthy Start vouchers are issued to families across the UK. Around 91% of these are spent and returned to the Healthy Start retailer reimbursement unit. 70% of vouchers are used with supermarkets the remainder are spent at pharmacies, independent shops, market stalls and milk roundsmen.

When retailers join the scheme they sign up to specific terms and conditions about handling Healthy Start vouchers. They are sent guidance annually and have access to a dedicated website www.healthystart.nhs.uk/hsru and helpline 0844 991 2222.

Following on from the consultation in 2010 the Department of Health commissioned independent market research agency Solutions Strategy Research Facilitation Ltd to carry out qualitative research in England to understand the scheme better from the perspective of the retailers that are central to its success.

The overall aims of the research were:

1. To explore retail staff views on and understanding of the Healthy Start scheme.
2. To understand more about voucher misuse, including retailers' perspectives on why this might happen, their views on beneficiaries' understanding of how to use vouchers and what more could be done to prevent misuse and mistakes.
3. To gather feedback on the guidance information provided by Healthy Start and understand whether there is a need for further / different support for retailers from Healthy Start in this respect.

Key findings from the research include:

- The Scheme is working well, with benefits to both Healthy Start families and retailers evident.
- Misuse of vouchers appeared rare – retailers found the scheme straightforward to follow and beneficiaries wanted to get the maximum value from the vouchers for their family.
- There are some simple ways retailers can further improve the delivery of Healthy Start in store.

Sample and method

- The research was conducted in October and November 2011 with Healthy Start families, a variety of retailer types registered to accept Healthy Start vouchers, and some unregistered retailers.
- In total 72 members of staff across a range of types of retailers were spoken to for this research and the summary below is based on their feedback only.
- The research was conducted across a range of locations in England.

Overall attitudes to the scheme from a retailer perspective

- The Healthy Start scheme is generally well-received. Retailers appreciated being able to help low income families purchase healthy produce and the financial benefits in terms of encouraging customers in store. For some retailers Healthy Start is also beneficial from a corporate social responsibility perspective.
- In terms of operational implementation the scheme is perceived to be working well overall - easy to understand and relatively easy to administer. Customers typically want to spend the full value of their voucher on eligible products and retailers wanted to operate the scheme correctly.
- The research did, however, identify that the scheme could lack salience. With many coupon schemes operating, and other potentially conflicting concerns such as providing good customer service and keeping till queues to a minimum the scheme could slip into the background and be operated on autopilot. This in turn can mean that in some cases issues with the delivery of the scheme are not always identified or proactively managed by retailers.

Scheme operation and perceptions of misuse

- Scheme misuse was not identified as a significant issue and it was not top of mind for retailers. When prompted however, some retailers did cite examples of customers trying to use the vouchers to redeem ineligible products.
- Occasional concerns were raised about voucher fraud, although the vouchers were seen as very secure. Most retailers knew that there were security features on them although few knew the full details (the watermark was best-known and the heat-sensitive keys were least known). When the full range of security features were fully explained, they were well received.

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- Checkout operators in supermarkets felt that it was easy to see 'at a glance' that Healthy Start families had used the full value of a voucher on eligible products when they did a big shop.
- In convenience stores with a more limited product range Healthy Start families typically bought fewer items, which also made it easier for staff to check product eligibility against voucher value.
- In pharmacies, Healthy Start families typically bought infant-formula milk only, which had a higher per-unit cost than the voucher's value.

Scheme understanding

- The scheme was generally well understood across registered retailers. In high-level terms, it was seen to be a scheme that offered low income families vouchers valued at £3.10 to spend on fruit, vegetables and milk.
- The concept of not giving change for vouchers was well understood as was the need to encourage Healthy Start families to use their full voucher value on eligible products.
- Staff were also aware that ineligible products were not to be purchased with vouchers, even to 'make up' the difference where a voucher's full value was not otherwise being spent.
- A few staff did report 'guestimating' the value of eligible products bought or taking £3.10 off the total shop if a beneficiary had spent near to £3.10 on eligible products rather than physically checking the precise value of the products.

Understanding of eligible product range:

Healthy start vouchers can be used to buy:

- *Plain cow's milk – whole, semi-skimmed or skimmed. The cow's milk can be pasteurised, sterilised, long-life or UHT.*
 - *Plain (no added ingredients) fresh or frozen fruit and veg – whole or chopped, packaged or loose.*
 - *Infant formula milk that says on the packet that it can be used from birth (and based on cow's milk).*
- Although the product range seemed simple at face value and there was good understanding of core products, the research identified a few points of confusion about the range.
 - One area of confusion related to which types of **frozen fruit and vegetables** were eligible. Specifically there was confusion around the inclusion of seasoning/added ingredients. The use of the word 'seasoned' with respect to frozen vegetables and what this actually meant in terms of which products are eligible was not always clearly understood.
 - '**Liquid cows' milk**' was well understood albeit there was slight confusion about whether UHT milk was allowed.

- **Formula milk** proved a more complicated product range. Although the vouchers state they can be used for 'infant formula milk' (which by definition is for babies under 12 months) some were not clear that follow on formulas were excluded. For many, the word 'infant' suggested a child up to age two. Given that Healthy Start vouchers are for children up to age four, it made intuitive sense to staff that follow-on milk would be eligible. In a few smaller independent stores there was a misperception that the scheme also included other 'basic healthy products' such as **bread and milk, juice or baby food**. Although not common, this was most typical when Healthy Start communications had not been seen, or had been forgotten.
- In general, when product eligibility was not fully understood or when a customer wanted to use a voucher for foods not included in the scheme, staff sometimes applied their own common sense (e.g. applying "five a day", "healthy food" or "food for children" assumptions or rules of thumb) and so potentially allowed ineligible products to be purchased.
- Where there was a perceived logical reason why an ineligible product could be accepted on the scheme - for example, soya milk for lactose intolerant children - retailers could feel under pressure to give in to customer demands. Customer service could thus conflict with good scheme operation in these situations.

Spending the full voucher value:

Healthy Start vouchers are worth £3.10. Customers can use more than one voucher at a time and can top up their vouchers with cash if required. They should be encouraged to use the full value of the voucher as they can't get change.

- Spending less than voucher value, although considered rare, did occasionally raise process questions. Although it was mostly clear that checkout operators should encourage Healthy Start families to include additional eligible products so that full voucher value was used, if a customer did not wish to spend the full value this could be potentially problematic.
- Some smaller retailers held vouchers for Healthy Start families (as permitted by scheme rules) so they could return to the store over time to spend the voucher value. Logistically difficult in larger stores, this led to retail staff wondering whether they should note on the voucher whether or not the full value had been used.

Awareness of security features:

Healthy Start vouchers have a watermark and a heat sensitive key which are both security features that retailers can use to check the authenticity of vouchers.

Retailers should also check the use by date of the vouchers. If vouchers have VOID written on the they should not be accepted.

Retailers shouldn't mark the barcodes on Healthy Start vouchers – striking through barcodes can prevent the vouchers from being processed when returned for reimbursement.

- Retailers understood they needed to check the date on the vouchers and scan the barcode. Not all retailers were aware of the full range of security features of the vouchers. There was particular interest in the heat sensitive key images as a discreet way of checking voucher authenticity.
- Differences of opinion were expressed across the sample as to whether or not it was acceptable to mark Healthy Start vouchers – for example, writing in the voucher value used, or scoring through them to indicate that they had been used. The differences between acceptable marking and defacing and thus invalidating vouchers (by defacing the barcode) were not always understood, with some stores assuming that all voucher-writing counted as defacement.

Reactions to Healthy Start materials

Healthy Start produces a retailer guide annually and also an A5 double sided quick guide which summarises the scheme for retailers and customers. This has been designed for use at point of sale and in training.

- Although the Healthy Start materials were not particularly well-recognised in stores, they were typically well-received during the interview. There was strong interest from stores that allowed materials at checkouts in having the quick guide to hand, both as a memory aid about eligible products, and as an NHS-branded credibility aid to show “difficult” customers.
- Both the quick guide and booklet were well-liked as potential training materials, and the booklet was seen as a good overview, although somewhat more aimed at supermarkets than other retailer types.
- The voucher design including its wording were sometimes raised as an area for improvement, with some suggestions of a redesign to help good understanding of the scheme and to act as a safety net at the point of sale. The words “from birth” could be used to clarify eligibility of infant formula milk, and the word “plain” could be clarified and more clearly linked to the text about fruit and vegetables.
- There was interest from some retailers in a more visual style of materials, and a list to help identification of the most common eligible products, as well as the most commonly misunderstood ineligible products. These would act as a quick, easy to use reminder mechanism.

Factors in place for good scheme operation

The scheme was felt to work particularly well when the following were in place:

- Formal staff training on Healthy Start as part of voucher training.
- Monitoring staff acceptance of vouchers, e.g. to check retraining needs.
- Good knowledge about product range including eligible frozen foods and baby milk.
- Good staff motivation to check products purchased and mechanisms in place to support this at the till without conflicting with good customer service.
- Checking of voucher security features.
- Materials at till (when not a paper free environment) to support product checking and customer questions.
- Good back up from managers in the event of customer query or intimidation.
- “Reminder” communications from Healthy Start, cascaded down from Head Offices where appropriate, to prevent the scheme from ‘slipping below the radar’.

Next steps:

- Improve awareness of resources available to retailers which could be used in training and with customers at POS.
- Continue to update scheme guidance annually and ensure it clarifies technical aspects of the scheme such as, where you can write on the voucher and what security features those at POS can use to check vouchers.
- Information sent to beneficiaries with their vouchers provides an opportunity to encourage them to organise their shopping in a way that makes it easier for retailers to check their Healthy Start purchases.
- Simple amends to the voucher to clarify infant formula milk *suitable from birth*.

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