



Equality Hub

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Women and Equalities Committee Chair
Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
House of Commons
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By email: womeqcom@parliament.uk

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Dear Caroline,

Thank you for your invitation to the Women and Equalities Select Committee on 6 March 2024, and for your letter of 7 March regarding your concerns around breast screening. As breast screening does not sit within my ministerial portfolio, I have asked Minister Stephenson, Minister of State for Health and Secondary Care, to respond to your letter by 21 March.

I am writing with further information on other points of interest that you and Committee Members raised.

Civil Service Returners Programme

As raised during the Committee session, in 2017 the Government committed to offering returner placements within the Civil Service with the aim of encouraging individuals to re-start their career as a result of their experience.

Posts were open to all individuals (not just civil servants or ex-civil servants) who had taken time out of work for at least 2 years, or were engaged in work that did not make the best use of their skills, competencies and qualifications. Initially, the Civil Service advertised 46 roles as part of a central Civil Service Returners Programme which ran across supporting departments. As a result, 42 offers for paid employment were made and 33 returners joined the programme.

Following the central campaign in 2018, departments took on board lessons learned and started planning their own recruitment of returners in line with their resourcing and workforce strategies. When departments offer returner placements these are advertised via the Civil Service Jobs platform.

Many of the broader approaches taken by the Cabinet Office will also disproportionately attract and benefit returners. For example, we remain committed to flexible working which takes many forms including working patterns, job sharing and location. Flexible working supports the Civil Service priority of ensuring continued, effective and productive delivery across a full range of services. It enables attraction and retention in a competitive job market whilst acting as a valuable talent management tool.

We also recognise the benefits flexible working can provide for individuals' wellbeing, work-life balance, mental health, stress management and personal development. It is key in enabling many parents and carers to remain in the workforce and to contribute effectively. Younger workers, carers and women tend to be the biggest users of these arrangements and Civil Service

departments, including the Cabinet Office, are often choice employers for these groups due to the flexibility on offer.

Healthy Start

The Committee asked about eligibility and access for the Healthy Start Scheme which helps to encourage a healthy diet for pregnant women, babies and young children from low-income households.

People are eligible for the Healthy Start scheme if they are claiming any of the following benefits:

- Income Support;
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance;
- Child Tax Credit (with an annual family income of £16,190 or less);
- Universal Credit (with family monthly take-home pay of £408 or less per month);
- Pension Credit.

Pregnant women on Income-related Employment and Support Allowance are also eligible for the scheme.

Anyone under 18 and pregnant is also eligible for the Healthy Start scheme, regardless of whether they receive any of the above benefits. However, once they have given birth, they must meet the benefit criteria to continue to be eligible.

Under the scheme, pregnant women and children over one and under four receive £4.25 every week, and children under one each receive £8.50 every week on their prepaid card. Healthy Start can be used to buy, or be put towards the cost of, fresh, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables, fresh, dried and tinned pulses, milk and infant formula. Healthy Start beneficiaries are also eligible for free Healthy Start Vitamins.

The NHS Business Services Authority was directed to run the Healthy Start scheme on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Care in 2021 and has led work to digitise the scheme. The digitised scheme has introduced an online application form and a prepaid card to replace the paper vouchers. Healthy Start now supports around 364,000 beneficiaries with uptake having grown under the fully digitised scheme.

Availability of period products

Thank you for raising the important issue of access to sanitary products. I am pleased that this government has taken a number of steps to ensure that period products are available and affordable for all who need them, including scrapping VAT, and rolling out free period products to colleges, schools and hospitals.

We are investing £25 million in women's health hubs so that women can get better access to care for essential services. I am looking into the availability of free period products at these health hubs.

I hope that this further information is helpful. Please do get in touch if the Committee requires anything further.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Maria', is positioned above the printed name.

MARIA CAULFIELD MP
Minister for Women