



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

Department of Health and  
Social Care  
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Rt Hon Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top  
Chair, House of Lords Public Services Committee

Baroness Pinnock  
Member, House of Lords Public Services Committee

28 February 2022

Dear Baroness Armstrong and Baroness Pinnock

*Reference: Increased evidence of children who are becoming vulnerable to malnutrition with severe consequences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic*

Thank you for your letter and the House of Lords Public Services Committee for their work on the 'Children in Crisis' report. The government has a range of programmes for supporting the nutrition of mothers and infants. We currently carry out surveys to assess the dietary and nutritional intake of a nationally representative sample of the population, and we have no specific plans to carry out a review of child malnutrition. However, NHS England and Improvement will add include malnutrition as one of the metrics they monitor as part of the children and young people dashboard.

The Department and its arms-length bodies are undertaking a range of work in relation to public health to help women, including those in the preconception period, to be as healthy as possible. This includes work on smoking cessation, promoting a healthy lifestyle and healthy eating. The NHS website provides information on healthy eating for pregnant women, and emphasises the importance of healthy eating for those who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy. Further information can be found at: <https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/have-a-healthy-diet/>.

NICE provides guidance on [Maternal and child nutrition](#) for NHS and other professionals involved in the nutrition of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and pre-school children. This includes recommendations for health visitors to provide mothers and other family members with support to introduce a variety of nutritious foods (in addition to milk) to ensure the child is offered a progressively varied diet from 6 months of age. Key priorities are the promotion of the Healthy Start scheme and of breastfeeding, which contributes to the health of both mother and child, in the short and long term.

To support families and babies and improve health and development outcomes during the early years of infancy, the Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP was appointed to lead the Early Years Healthy Development Review in July 2020. The Review's report - 'Best Start for Life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days' - recognises that many

parents struggle with breastfeeding and all mothers should be supported throughout their breastfeeding journey. It sets out a vision for infant feeding support to be included as part of the Universal offer to all parents and carers, including help for breastfeeding, advice and early diagnosis of issues such as tongue-tie, and help with formula feeding where that is more appropriate.

Public health advice recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life and national guidance has been revised and published for midwifery and health visiting services to support breastfeeding<sup>1</sup>. In October 2021, the Government committed £50 million to improve breastfeeding support services in the next Spending Review period. Funding will be made available to 75 upper tier local authorities to design and deliver a blended offer of advice and support that will create a supportive breastfeeding environment locally and help mothers to meet their breastfeeding goals.

In our response to the report about the tragic death of baby Maya, the Healthy Start Scheme supports hundreds of thousands of pregnant women and families on lower incomes to make healthier food choices. In April 2021 we increased the value of Healthy Start from £3.10 to £4.25 to help more families adopt a healthy diet. Pregnant women and families with children aged under four and over receive one voucher per week, worth £4.25, and families with children under one receive two vouchers, worth £8.50 in total, every week. The NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) are leading the work to digitise the Healthy Start scheme, on behalf of the Department, to help families to apply for, receive and use the benefits. The digitised Healthy Start scheme has introduced an online application form, to replace the paper form, and a pre-paid card to replace the paper vouchers.

The Nursery Milk Scheme, which reimburses childcare providers for one-third of a pint of milk per day for children under the age of five, and the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, which provides a free daily portion of fresh produce to children in Key Stage 1 at state-funded primary schools, can also make a contribution to good nutrition among children in these age groups.

In our initial response, we recognised the importance of the universal offer of health visiting to keep children safe and provide primary prevention, and acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of health visiting services. As outlined in the [Health Visiting and School Nursing Service Delivery Model](#), commissioners and providers may wish to consider development of a recovery plan to address the impact of COVID-19 in partnership with other agencies to support multi-agency support, monitoring and evaluation. Recovery planning should seek to prioritise those who are most vulnerable.

Health visitors, as public health nurses, can enable effective working with parents and families to promote health protection and to keep children safe. Young children's

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<sup>1</sup> [Early years high impact area 3: Supporting breastfeeding - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#), [Health visiting and school nursing service delivery model - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#), [Care continuity between midwifery and health visiting services: principles for practice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

weight should be monitored where there is a concern, with parents also encouraged to monitor growth and development. Families should be supported to address the family and child's needs based on clinical assessment. This includes being alert to, and assessing for signs of, being underweight - potentially as a sign of neglect or faltering growth.<sup>2</sup>

Effective safeguarding arrangements seek to prevent harm and abuse, and protect individuals from them. All healthcare staff are required to complete training on safeguarding for children and adults to ensure they understand the key principles to protect vulnerable people. Parents and carers have primary responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of their baby, but local authorities - working with partner organisations and agencies - have specific statutory duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of all babies and children in their area. Midwives and health visitors have important roles in the identification of need and are often the people who will first flag a safeguarding concern by making a referral to local authority children's social care if concerned about a baby's welfare. The local authority and its social workers have specific roles and responsibilities to lead the statutory assessment of children in need and to lead child protection enquiries.

Child nutrition is also supported by the Department for Education. The government supports the provision of nutritious food in schools, which ensures pupils are well nourished, develop healthy eating habits and can concentrate and learn. Under the benefits based criteria, 1.7 million of the most disadvantaged pupils are eligible for and claiming a free school meal. This saves families around £400 per year. We spend around £600 million per year ensuring an additional 1.3 million infants enjoy a free, healthy and nutritious meal at lunchtime following the introduction of the Universal Infant Free School Meal policy in 2014. Our new eligibility criteria introduced in April 2018 are forecast to increase the number of children receiving this vital benefit by 2022, compared to the previous benefits system. Transitional protections were put in place to ensure no child will lose their eligibility for free school meals during the rollout of Universal Credit. Benefits-based free meals were extended to disadvantaged students in Further Education institutions in 2014. All meals provided by schools must meet the School Food Standards.

The Department for Education are working with stakeholders to understand how we can best support schools and their governing bodies to meet the school food standards. This includes investing up to £200k in a pilot Governor Training Scheme, and encouraging schools to complete a statement on their school websites, which sets out their whole school approach to food. We will go into more detail on the measures we are taking to support schools in the forthcoming Government Food Strategy White Paper.

The Government is committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling poverty and supporting people on lower incomes. We will spend around £240bn through the welfare system in 2021/22, of which around £59 billion is spent on supporting disabled people and people with health conditions in Great Britain. The government has announced it will provide significant financial support - up to £350 -

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<sup>2</sup> Early years high impact area 4: Supporting healthy weight and nutrition - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

to the majority of households, protecting them from half of the forecast £700 rise in energy bills. These new measures are on top of the existing £12 billion support the government is providing for the cost of living this financial year and next to help families with the cost of living.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Maria'.

**MARIA CAULFIELD MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Patient Safety and Primary