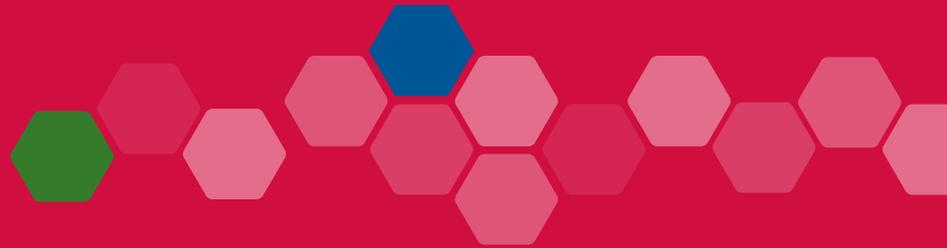




Evaluation of Best Start Foods



EQUALITY AND WELFARE

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Executive Summary

Background

The Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 introduced a range of new benefits devolved to Scotland. Best Start Foods was introduced using these powers, replacing the UK Healthy Start Vouchers in Scotland. Best Start Foods is designed to provide financial support for low income families to access nutritious food at the point of need. It is one of a range of Scottish Government policies set out in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan¹ which are intended to tackle health inequalities and reduce child poverty in Scotland.

Best Start Foods is delivered via a payment card, which can be used like a normal bank card with contactless or Chip & Pin features. The payment amounts are:

- £4.50 per week for pregnant women and families with children aged 1 and 2
- £9.00 per week for families with children aged under 1, to support both the mother and the child.

The Best Start Foods system went live in August 2019, and the transition period from Healthy Start Vouchers was completed by the end of March 2020. To maximise take-up of the benefit, the application form is part of a joint application for both Best Start Foods and Best Start Grant. People can also choose to apply for Scottish Child Payment using the same form.

This report presents an evaluation of the benefit which is based on progress towards its immediate and short-term policy outcomes. However, it also considers progress towards Best Start Foods' medium-term outcomes, and its contribution to the Scottish Government's long-term aims (e.g. reduced health inequalities). The policy outcomes of Best Start Foods relate to the benefit's impact on people who receive the payments (hereafter referred to as 'recipients'), but the evaluation also considers the experience of Best Start Foods applicants in general.

The evaluation of Best Start Foods is largely based on findings from qualitative research that was commissioned and undertaken by ScotGen, attached in full at Annex B. The qualitative research involved interviews with Best Start Foods recipients, healthcare professionals who support applicants, and retailers who participate in the Best Start Foods scheme. However, it also draws on Official Statistics and a survey of benefits applicants which was undertaken by Social Security Scotland.

Promotion and take-up of Best Start Foods

People find out about the Best Start Foods in a range of ways, including via healthcare professionals, word of mouth and media advertising. However, there is a

¹ Scottish Government (2022) [Best start, bright futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-2026](#).

sense amongst recipients and stakeholders that that there are families, healthcare professionals and retailers with little or no awareness of the benefit, and that more could be done to promote Best Start Foods.

Best Start Foods is claimed by people across Scotland with a diverse range of demographic and equalities characteristics. Over the period April 2020 to June 2021, take-up of Best Start Foods was estimated to be 77%. This means that a majority of eligible people had claimed the benefit, and indicates that early promotional efforts were largely effective. However, it also shows that almost 1 in 4 eligible people had not claimed Best Start Foods, suggesting further steps may still be needed to maximise take-up of the benefit. The next take-up estimate of Best Start Foods is due to be published later this year.

Understanding Best Start Foods

Understanding and knowledge of Best Start Foods is mixed amongst people who apply for the benefit. There are applicants who (upon being made aware of the benefit) conduct their own research on it, and others who are given details by people who support them to make a claim – e.g. healthcare professionals. However, there are people who do not realise that Best Start Foods is part of a joint application form with the Best Start Grant, and therefore do not become aware of Best Start Foods until they receive a decision letter for their claim.

Recipients of Best Start Foods generally understand the purpose of the benefit, and find the guidance letter they receive with the card (and the list of items printed on the side) to be clear and informative. However, some report issues with the guidance, e.g.:

- Having to rely on others to explain it to them because English is not their first language, and they were not aware it comes in other languages
- That it does not contain a fuller list of retailers where the Best Start Foods card can, and cannot, be used, and information on how to use the card online
- That guidance information is overwhelming and could be more succinct.

There is also some confusion around the recommended list of foods that can be bought with Best Start Foods. For example, some do not realise that it can be used to buy tinned fruit and vegetables, pulses and eggs. Others think it can be used for foods (and non-food items) that are not on the recommended list.

The evaluation also highlights that some recipients do not realise when their Best Start Foods payments will end, and are caught off guard when this happens. While there is information online that indicates that Best Start Foods will stop when a child turns 3, some people are unaware of this, or have forgotten about it.

Applying for Best Start Foods

Most Best Start Foods applicants feel that they are treated well by Social Security Scotland during the application process. The application form is also considered quick and straightforward to complete, and people mostly view the joint application form as positive because it is time-saving. People are also generally satisfied with the process of receiving payments.

Despite these positives, the evaluation highlights some issues with the application process:

- Some people need support when filling out an application e.g. due to difficulties understanding English, a lack of access to technology, or issues with literacy skills.
- Application processing times have increased each year since the benefit was introduced. This includes time spent waiting to receive copies of documents or evidence requested from clients. Lengthy waits for application outcomes can make applicants feel anxious. However, those who are told there might be delays feel reassured and are more understanding about long waiting times.
- There can be long waiting times when calling the Social Security Scotland helpline to enquire about the progress of claims.
- Some people report receiving multiple requests from Social Security Scotland for the same supporting information after submitting an application form.
- Some feel that the decision letter does not explain the reason for their application outcome clearly, in cases where claims are denied.

The Best Start Foods card system

Overall, recipients prefer Best Start Foods to the previous Healthy Start Vouchers system, because they feel the payment card is more discreet. They feel less embarrassed and stigmatised using the card in shops. Recipients also report that the card is easier to use and more convenient than vouchers – e.g. because it facilitates contactless payments and the ability to self-checkout in shops. People who do not speak English also prefer it because the format is familiar to them, and they do not need to speak or read English to use it.

However, some experience difficulties using the card for the first time. This is because, for example, they have not read, or could not read, the guidance on how to use the card when making an initial transaction. Also, some recipients say that they always have to use Chip & Pin in stores because their contactless payments do not work.

Recipients report that Best Start Foods can be used in more shops than Healthy Start Vouchers. This enables recipients to shop around and find the lowest prices. However, there are mixed views on the range of recommended foods available with Best Start Foods. While some feel it is appropriate for their needs, others feel some

healthy foods are not on the list – e.g. wholegrains and fish. While healthcare professionals are generally positive about the range of foods, some also feel it could be restrictive for young recipients in particular who do not have the skills or confidence to cook healthy meals from scratch.

Retailers report that the Best Start Foods card is an improvement on the Healthy Start Vouchers scheme. They say it is more convenient because they receive payments immediately, as opposed to submitting vouchers to receive payments. However, they find it challenging not having data on how their customers use the card, and feel this information would enable them to make informed choices on stock and in store promotions.

The impact of Best Start Foods

Progress towards short-term policy outcomes

Best Start Foods helps people to buy a greater quantity (and quality) of healthy foods. The qualitative evidence suggests that people use it to mainly buy cow's milk, baby formula, fresh fruit and vegetables. Some also use it for other recommended items (e.g. eggs, pulses, and frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables). In addition, recipients report using the card to buy items not on the recommended list (e.g. bread, pasta, fish, poultry and meat), and even non-food items (e.g. nappies, baby toiletries and clothes).

The evaluation also shows that Best Start Foods has supported healthier shopping habits and meal planning, and has enabled mothers and children to eat more healthy foods. For example, recipients purchase healthier snacks for their children, instead of processed foods like crisps, and some use payments to experiment with new healthy recipes. Recipients also say the benefit gives them more freedom to let their children try a greater range of healthy foods without worrying about wasting money or food. Healthcare professionals also report that families are excited about trying different healthy foods as a result of receiving Best Start Foods.

Best Start Foods has also helped to reduce financial pressure on households. For some recipients it is a 'lifesaver', because it guarantees they can afford essential foods for their children even when finances are difficult. For others the payments have freed up money for costs such as household bills or items (e.g. clothes) for their children. Healthcare professionals also report that their clients seem less burdened with money worries as a result of having Best Start Foods.

Despite these positive outcomes, some recipients find it difficult to afford the same amount of healthy foods when their children turn 1, and they return to the lower rate of Best Start Foods. Healthcare professionals also raise concerns about reducing payments when children turn 1, and the impact it will have on healthy food shopping. Also, while recipients appreciate the financial support offered by Best Start Foods, they feel the impact would be greater if eligibility was extended until their child starts school. Some recipients share that they would find it difficult to cover the costs of nutritious food after Best Start Foods comes to an end.

Contribution to medium-term policy outcomes

A full assessment of progress towards Best Start Foods' medium-term outcomes would require: (a) more time to have passed since the benefit was implemented, and (b) access to more robust quantitative data. However, the findings summarised above indicate that the benefit has led to reduced incidence of food insecurity and increased healthy eating behaviours.

There is also evidence that Best Start Foods has contributed to better health and wellbeing for children and their mothers. As mentioned above, Best Start Foods recipients feel reassured that they can buy essential foods for their children, and this helps to reduce financial stress and anxiety. Recipients also mentioned other positive health and wellbeing impacts of Best Start Foods, including:

- Observing their children eating more fruit and vegetables, which they feel is good for them nutritionally and supports their development
- Feeling positive about being able to provide their children with more nutritious food
- Feeling less anxious or self-conscious about using the Best Start Foods in shops compared to when they received Healthy Start Vouchers
- In cases where they experienced mental health problems, feeling more comfortable being able to use the card online.

Conclusion and policy implications

The evaluation shows that Best Start Foods has largely achieved its immediate and short-term policy outcomes, and has made progress towards its medium-term policy outcomes. It is therefore likely to have contributed positively to the Scottish Government's long-term aims (e.g. reduced health inequalities and reduced child poverty). However, the evaluation also highlights some issues with Best Start Foods. These issues and their implications are as following:

1. Recipients and stakeholders feel that more could be done to raise awareness of Best Start Foods amongst families, healthcare professionals, and retailers. Regarding take-up, the most recent estimate suggests that 23% of eligible people over the period April 2020 to June 2021 had not claimed Best Start Foods. While this figure may have changed since then (a new estimate will be published later this year), steps may be needed to maximise take-up of Best Start Foods, including further promotional work.
2. There is mixed awareness that Best Start Foods is part of a joint application with Best Start Grant, and some people only become aware of Best Start Foods when they receive an application decision letter. Additionally, there is evidence that some recipients do not realise payments will stop when their child turns 3. It may therefore be necessary to improve awareness of Best Start Foods amongst those who apply, and communicate clearly to recipients the cut-off date for payments.

3. The Best Start Foods guidance letter (given to recipients when they receive their Best Start Foods card) is generally considered to be informative and clear. However, some recipients experience issues with the guidance, e.g. some are not aware that it comes in other languages and need help to read it, and others report that it does not contain a comprehensive list of participating retailers. There is also some confusion about the recommended list of foods, and a general lack of awareness that the card can be used for online shopping. As such, the guidance may need to be reviewed, and steps taken to improve or clarify the content where possible.
4. The evaluation highlights that some people need support when filling out the Best Start Foods application form – e.g. due to difficulties understanding English and issues with literacy skills. It is not clear how widespread these experiences are amongst applicants. However, the application process could be reviewed to see if changes are necessary or possible. This might involve increasing awareness of existing accessibility features in Social Security Scotland’s application forms, which includes translation services.
5. While Best Start Foods helps people to buy more (and better quality) healthy foods, some recipients feel that the recommended list of foods should contain other items they view as being healthy (e.g. wholegrains or fish), and cater more to children with special dietary needs. Healthcare professionals also raise concerns that the range of foods does not reflect their clients’ eating habits in cases where they lack the skills or confidence to cook healthy meals from scratch. It may therefore be necessary to review the Best Start Foods range and extend it if necessary.
6. Some recipients experience difficulties using the Best Start Foods card for the first time e.g. because it is not yet activated. Some also report that contactless payments do not work on their card, meaning they have to use Chip & Pin. As such, there may be a need to provide clearer guidance to recipients on how to use the card for the first time. Additionally, while it is not clear how widespread issues are with contactless payments, there may be a need to investigate possible technical problems with this feature of the card.
7. Retailers feel that Best Start Foods is more convenient than the Healthy Start Vouchers system. However, they also say they would like more information about how recipients use the card in their shops, to help them make informed choices on stock and in store promotions. As such, it might be necessary to explore whether retailers can be given data on how people use the Best Start Foods card.
8. Best Start Foods is generally considered a helpful contribution towards costs, and reassures recipients that they can afford essential foods for their children if money becomes tight. However, recipients and stakeholders raise concerns about the rate of payment dropping when children turn 1, and some recipients feel that they will not be able to afford nutritious foods when payments end. As such, it is important that recipients’ perceptions of impact

should continue to be monitored over time, and the rate of Best Start Foods kept under review.

9. Application processing times have increased each year since Best Start Foods was introduced, and some recipients report long waiting times on the Social Security Scotland helpline when calling about claims. There are also cases where applicants are asked on multiple occasions for the same supporting evidence. As such, it may be necessary to review the application process to determine whether (a) decision making can be expedited, and (b) the evidence gathering process can be improved. Steps may also be needed to ensure that applicants are kept better informed about the progress of applications, and to reduce helpline waiting times for applicants who enquire about their claims.
10. While the evaluation indicates that progress has been made to longer-term outcomes associated with Best Start Foods, it is not possible with the information available to make objective assessments in these areas. As such, more data should be sought and made available for future evaluations.

Introduction

This section introduces Best Start Foods and the rationale behind its implementation. It also summarises the eligibility criteria for Best Start Foods, aspects of the application process, and the overall evaluation aims relevant to this report.

Best Start Foods: description and background

The Scottish Government is determined that every child should get the best start in life, regardless of their circumstances.² A key part of this is ensuring that children eat well and have a healthy weight, because eating patterns in early childhood influence health and happiness in later life.³ However, the 2019 Scottish Health Survey showed that 30% of children in Scotland were at risk of being overweight or obese, and that food insecurity affects around 13% of families – outcomes which are linked with poverty and deprivation.⁴ It is therefore crucial that families on low incomes are given support which enables them to make healthier food choices.

The Social Security powers devolved through the [Scotland Act 2016](#) give the Scottish Parliament responsibility for £2.8 billion of social security expenditure (around 15% of total benefit expenditure in Scotland), enacted through the [Social Security \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#). The Welfare Foods (Scotland) Regulations 2019 were laid in Parliament in May 2019, and Best Start Foods system went live in August 2019, replacing the UK Healthy Start Vouchers in Scotland. Healthy Start Vouchers is managed by the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care, which continued to deliver Healthy Start Vouchers to Scottish recipients until they transitioned onto the Best Start Foods scheme. This transition period was completed by the end of March 2020.

Best Start Foods is designed to provide financial support for low income families to access nutritious food at the point of need. It is a weekly sum of £4.50 available to pregnant women and families with children aged 1 and 2, while families with children aged under 1 receive a double weekly payment of £9.00 to support both the mother and the child. The payments are made every four weeks via payment card, which can be used like a normal bank card with contactless or Chip & Pin features. It works in all supermarkets or local shops which stock healthy food and that accept bank card payments, and can also be used online. The following items are available to purchase via Best Start Foods:

- Fresh eggs
- Milk – plain cow's milk and first infant formula
- Fruit/vegetables – fresh, frozen or tinned (those with added salt and sugar are excluded)

² Scottish Government 2022: [Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan](#)

³ Scottish Government 2018: [A healthier future: Scotland's diet and healthy weight delivery plan](#).

⁴ Scottish Government 2019: [Scottish Health Survey 2019](#).

- Pulses (e.g. peas, lentils and beans) – dried, fresh, frozen or tinned.

To receive Best Start Foods, recipients must meet a range of eligibility criteria.⁵ All of those who apply must be resident in Scotland, and they (or their partners) must be pregnant or the main carer of a child aged under 3. Recipients under 18 do not need to be on any benefits to apply for Best Start Foods. However, recipients over 18 (or their partners) must also be receiving certain benefits and, where applicable, an income threshold applies.

To support income maximisation, and to reduce the administrative burden on applicants, recipients can also apply for Best Start Grant and Scottish Child Payment on the same application form.

Application process

Applications can be made online, by phone, and by paper form ('application channel'). There is a single application form for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods that covers the three Best Start Grant Payments and Best Start Foods. Rather than indicating what they wish to apply for on the form, applicants provide details about themselves, their partner, all dependent children, and any details about their pregnancy and expected children. When the application is processed, Social Security Scotland determines which elements of Best Start Grant the client is eligible to receive, and makes a single payment to the client to cover all of these elements. Social Security Scotland will also determine whether the client is eligible for Best Start Foods.

On 9 November 2020, Social Security Scotland began taking applications for Scottish Child Payment. At the beginning of the application process, individuals can choose to make a joint application for Scottish Child Payment, Best Start Grant, and Best Start Foods. If they choose to do this, the applicant completes one application form for all of these benefits.

In terms of processing and the subsequent reporting of official statistics, the joint application can be thought of as two separate applications; one for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods, and another for Scottish Child Payment.

Social Security Scotland processes each application received and makes a decision whether to approve or deny the application. Decisions for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods are normally made at the same time. An application will be denied if the client is not eligible to receive any of the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods payments. An application will be authorised if the client is eligible to receive at least one of the Best Start Grant or Best Start Foods payments. Applicants may also withdraw their application before a decision is made.

Social Security Scotland aims to process the application, make a decision and provide decision letters to the applicant within 21 days of receiving an application. Separate letters for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods are provided.

⁵ Scottish Government (2021): [Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods: Who should apply](#).

Applications may take longer to process if copies of documents need to be requested and received from recipients.

Accessibility of Best Start Foods

Social Security Scotland is committed to accessibility. To maximise this, multiple application channels are available: digital, paper and telephone. The digital application process is compatible with assistive technologies and recipients can request phone calls and letters in a variety of formats e.g. in over 100 different languages, using BSL video calls, or in braille, easy read and large print.

Evaluation aims

The Scottish Government published its approach to evaluating the first wave of devolved social security benefits in November 2019.⁶

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide learning about the overall implementation of Best Start Foods and the extent to which its immediate and short-term outcomes have been met. In doing so, it can also assess progress towards Best Start Foods' medium-term outcomes, and its likely contribution to long-term government impacts for children, such as reduced health inequalities. However, the latter, long-term impacts will also be affected by Scottish Government interventions outwith social security, designed to support children and their families. As such, they will not only be attributable to Best Start Foods.

Specifically, the evaluation objectives are to:

1. Evaluate the extent to which Best Start Foods achieved its policy outcomes.
2. Assess the likely contribution of Best Start Foods to wider long-term government outcomes for children and their families.
3. Discuss implications for future policy development.

The findings will form the policy evaluation of Best Start Foods, and will set the groundwork for policy improvements. Please note that the Best Start Foods evaluation is one of a series on low income benefits administered by Social Security Scotland, including an evaluation of Best Start Grant.⁷

⁶ Scottish Government (2019) [Devolved benefits: evaluating the policy impact](#)

⁷ Scottish Government (2022) [Social security policy research and evaluation: publications](#)

Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the evaluation approach for Best Start Foods. It introduces the logic model and research questions driving the evaluation activities, and gives a summary of the different data sources used.

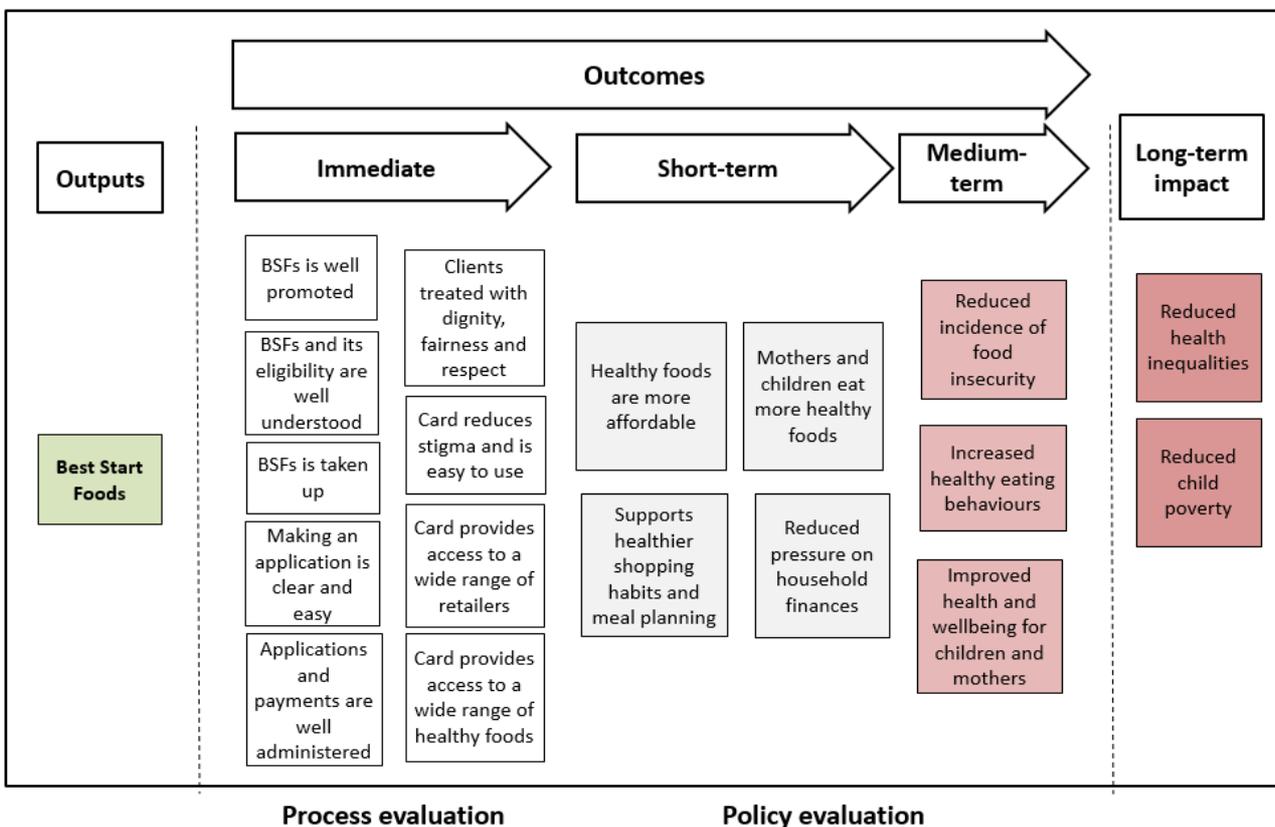
Overview of evaluation design and logic model

The Best Start Foods policy evaluation uses a “theory of change” model. The model shows the mechanisms whereby interventions (such as Best Start Foods) have a chain of immediate, short-term, and medium-term outcomes. If these outcomes are achieved, they can contribute to wider Scottish Government policy impacts in the long-term.

The Scottish Government’s long-term policy impacts (e.g. reduced health inequalities) will take time to determine. They will also be affected by a range of factors in addition to Best Start Foods, making it difficult to measure and attribute changes specifically to that payment. However, the achievement of short-term policy outcomes (e.g. mothers and children eat more healthy foods) could reasonably be expected to contribute to these wider outcomes.

The logic model for Best Start Foods is below at Figure 1:

Figure 1 Best Start Foods (BSFs) logic model



Immediate outcomes (Process Evaluation)

- Best Start Foods is well promoted
- Best Start Foods and its eligibility criteria are well understood
- Best Start Foods is taken up
- Making an application is clear and easy
- Applications and payments are processed in a timely manner
- Recipients treated with dignity, fairness and respect
- Card reduces stigma and is easy to use
- Card provides access to a wide range of retailers
- Card provides access to a wide range of healthy foods

Short-term outcomes (Policy Evaluation)

- Healthy foods are more affordable
- Supports healthier shopping habits and meal planning
- Mothers and children eat more healthy foods
- Reduced pressure on household finances

Medium-term outcomes (Policy Evaluation)

- Reduced incidence of food insecurity
- Increased healthy eating behaviours
- Improved health and wellbeing for children and mothers

Long-term outcomes and impacts

The long-term impacts in the logic model (reduced health inequalities and reduced child poverty) relate not only to Best Start Foods but to the wider government outcomes for children and their families, and are influenced by all social security interventions, as well as other interventions designed to support families with children across the Scottish Government. As such, Best Start Foods will play an important, but not exclusive, role in contributing to these.

Evaluation questions

Below are the key questions that informed the evaluation design:

1. To what extent did Best Start Foods achieve its immediate, short-term, and medium-term policy outcomes?

2. Is there any evidence of Best Start Foods contributing to long-term government policy impacts of (a) reduced health inequalities and (b) reduced child poverty?
3. What are the implications of the evaluation findings for future policy development?

Summary of data sources

In accordance with the evaluation strategy⁶, the evidence used in this report was drawn from multiple data sources, described below:

Bespoke commissioned research

ScotCen was commissioned by the Scottish Government to conduct qualitative research with Best Start Foods recipients, healthcare professionals who work with recipients, and food retailers. The research mainly focused on peoples' experience of receiving the benefit, and how this mapped on to Best Start Foods policy objectives (i.e. the immediate, short-term and medium-term outcomes outlined above). However, it also explored additional aims, such as potential barriers to applying for the benefit.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 33 Best Start Foods recipients across Scotland. Additionally, 5 interviews were held with healthcare professionals and 9 interviews were held with retailers. Fieldwork took place via telephone or video call between December 2021 and February 2022.⁸ The main findings from the commissioned research are presented in this report to provide a fuller understanding of the implementation and impact of Best Start Foods at this early stage of delivery. The full report from ScotCen, including more details on research methods and sample demographics, is available at Annex B.

Official Statistics

Social Security Scotland collects information on applications, payments, and recipients in the process of delivering the benefits. Some of this information is published online as Official Statistics. The following Official Statistics publications are used as sources of evidence in this report:

- [Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods: high level statistics to 28 February 2022](#)
- [Social Security Scotland client diversity and equalities analysis to May 2021](#)
- [Social Security Scotland feedback: statistics to 30 September 2021](#)

Of these three publications, the high level statistics data is used most frequently, and is hereafter referred to as "Official Statistics". The other publications are named in full when they are cited.

⁸ The Scottish Government had a moratorium on face-to-face research at this time due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Supplementary analysis was carried out for the purposes of this evaluation to provide additional information on approved applications for Best Start Foods. This included a more detailed breakdown of relationship status, application channels, processing time categories, kinship status, and payment type. This analysis was produced using the same data as the [Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods: high level statistics to 28 February 2022 publication](#).

Supplementary analysis was also carried out using the data from the Social Security Scotland client diversity and equalities analysis to May 2021 publication. This included breakdowns for approved Best Start Foods applications on a number of applicant characteristics including gender, age, ethnicity, health condition, gender identity, sexual orientation, and geography.

The full supplementary analysis tables used in this report are provided at Annex A.

Please also note the following technical points about how Official Statistics are presented throughout this report:

- Figures are rounded for disclosure control and may not sum due to rounding
- Where stated, secondary analysis has been conducted on rounded figures from published Official Statistics
- Most results are presented to zero decimal places. '0%' should therefore be interpreted to mean less than 0.5%. If no responses were given then this is denoted by '-'.

More detailed figures and information about the Official Statistics used in this report are provided at Annex A.

Social Security Scotland Client Survey

The Social Security Scotland Client Survey ran August/September 2020 (round 1) and May/June 2021 (round 2). It was open to everyone who at that time had received either (a) a Social Security Scotland benefit, or (b) a successful decision on a benefit application from Social Security Scotland's inception in September 2018 to March 2021.

The Client Survey collected equalities and socio-economic information from respondents. It also asked about their experience of Social Security Scotland and receiving benefits. In total, the survey received 10,575 responses (around 4% of the total number of invites sent), of whom:

1. 971 had **only applied** for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant (on the joint application form), as opposed to having applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant and other Social Security Scotland benefits. Data collected from these respondents is used to assess peoples' experiences and views of applying for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant on the joint application form. This is because their views and experiences specifically relate to applying for **only** these benefits,.

2. 78 had **only received** Best Start Foods i.e. as opposed to having received Best Start Foods and other Social Security Scotland benefits. Data collected from these respondents is used to assess peoples' experiences and views of receiving Best Start Foods payments. This is because their views and experiences specifically relate to receiving Best Start Foods, as opposed to receiving potentially numerous benefits.

Please also note the following technical points about how Client Survey findings are presented throughout this report:

- The number of respondents providing a valid answer to each individual question/statement varied slightly, within the ranges shown.
- Most results to the closed questions are rounded to whole numbers. As such, results (e.g. those presented in tables) may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
- Most results are presented to zero decimal places. '0%' should therefore be interpreted to mean less than 0.5%. If no responses were given then this is denoted by '-'.

Limitations

This section explains what can and cannot be determined from the available data sources, and how this influences the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about the early impact of Best Start Foods.

Role of qualitative research: The evaluation is largely dependent on findings from qualitative research commissioned by the Scottish Government. This provides a rich and detailed insight into the impact of Best Start Foods on recipients with a range of personal and demographic characteristics, and also the views of health professionals and retailers. However, the research also has the following limitations:

1. The findings are not representative of all Best Start Foods recipients, because (a) while diverse, the overall sample of participants was small, and (b) participants were self-selecting, meaning that they actively chose to take part, as opposed to being randomly selected.
2. Findings are based on the participants' perceptions of impact, rather than objective measures of impact.

These are standard limitations of qualitative work. More detail on limitations has been provided at Annex B.

Role of Social Security Scotland research: The Client Survey findings contained in this report are based on up to 971 responses from people who applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant on the joint application form, or who received Best Start Foods (and the number of respondents providing a valid answer to each

individual question/statement varies within the ranges shown throughout the report).

Although the survey results provide insight into the views and experiences of a substantial number of Social Security Scotland recipients, it should be cautioned that this represents a small fraction of the 185,725 Best Start Foods applicants to 28 February 2022, and that views are drawn from a self-selecting sample of applicants. No weighting had been applied to counteract potential response bias. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the results represent the views of Best Start Foods recipients as a whole.

It should also be noted that the Client Survey was designed for all Social Security Scotland recipients, not just Best Start Foods applicants. This means that questions are worded in a general way to make them applicable to all benefits. Therefore, while it is a useful source of supplementary evidence, it is not specifically designed to gather the views and experiences of Best Start Foods recipients about the benefit.

Medium and long-term impacts will take time and additional data to determine: Understanding the true impact of Best Start Foods would involve measuring (a) progress towards medium-term policy outcomes, and (b) its lasting contribution to wider Scottish Government outcomes. Doing so requires suitable time to have passed, and for the latter in particular, it would involve isolating the influence of Best Start Foods from other contributing factors, such as wider social security benefits and other government interventions designed to support families with children. A step in this direction would be to gain access to data with appropriate outcome variables e.g. from population surveys, or further bespoke research. However, at the time of writing there are no concrete proposals on future evaluations of Best Start Foods.

More detail on options for extended policy evaluation is provided in the evaluation strategy report.⁶

Findings

In this chapter of the report, the data sources outlined in the methodology chapter are used to evaluate progress towards Best Start Foods' immediate, short-term and medium-term policy outcomes. Based on this, likely progress towards the Scottish Government's longer term outcomes are assessed. The section ends with a discussion of the policy implications which emerge from the evaluation findings.

Achievement against immediate Best Start Foods policy outcomes

This section evaluates Best Start Foods against the following policy outcomes:

- Best Start Foods is well promoted
- Best Start Foods and its eligibility criteria are well understood
- Best Start Foods is taken up
- Making an application is clear and easy
- Applications and payments are processed in a timely manner
- Recipients treated with dignity, fairness and respect
- Card reduces stigma and is easy to use
- Card provides access to a wide range of retailers
- Card provides access to a wide range of healthy foods

Where applicable, it uses data from Official Statistics, Social Security Scotland research, and bespoke commissioned research.

Best Start Foods is well promoted

There are a number of ways to evaluate whether Best Start Foods is well promoted. An indirect method is to look at overall take-up of Best Start Foods, as this could be related to the effectiveness of promotional activity. Take-up refers to the extent to which people receive the benefits they are eligible for. This can be estimated by measuring the 'take-up' rate, which is the number of benefit recipients divided by the number of people eligible to receive the benefit.

A provisional take-up estimate is provided for Best Start Foods in the [Social security: benefit take-up strategy](#). It shows that over the period April 2020 to June 2021, take-up was estimated to be 77%. This means that:

1. Most people who were eligible for Best Start Foods claimed the benefit, indicating that promotions were largely effective.
2. Almost 1 in 4 eligible people had not claimed the benefit, suggesting further steps may still be needed to maximise take-up of the benefit.

However, it should be noted that the most recently published take-up figure is now outdated, and that updated an estimate of take-up will be published later this year.

Another way to evaluate Best Start Foods promotion is to consider how people find out about the benefit. The commissioned research shows that recipients became aware of Best Start Foods through a range of sources, including:

- Healthcare professionals (e.g., midwives, family nurses, health visitors)
- Other professionals (e.g. benefits advisors, case workers)
- Word-of-mouth (family and friends)
- Advertisements (online, posters, TV adverts)
- Directly from Social Security Scotland if they had previously received Healthy Start Vouchers

Of these sources, recipients most commonly became aware of Best Start Foods from healthcare professionals they were in regular contact with. It should also be noted that some recipients said they only became aware of Best Start Foods when they received a decision letter on their benefits claim. These recipients were generally unaware that Best Start Foods was part of a joint application with Best Start Grant.

All participant groups agreed that the promotion of Best Start Foods could be improved. There was a sense that there were families, healthcare professionals and retailers who had little or no awareness of the benefit. Recipients reported knowing families who were not aware of the change from Healthy Start Vouchers, and who had assumed their vouchers had stopped because they were no longer eligible and therefore had not applied for Best Start Foods. Additionally, a number of the retailers who took part in the research had not been aware of Best Start Foods before being contacted to take part in an interview. They had been aware of Healthy Start Vouchers, but had assumed that the scheme had stopped altogether.

Best Start Foods and its eligibility criteria are well understood

Overall, the commissioned research participants who had received Best Start Foods were aware that the purpose of the benefit was to purchase healthy foods for their children. They were informed of what items could be purchased in the guidance letter they received with the Best Start Foods card. The list was also stated on the card, which was found to be a helpful reminder when shopping. Recipients generally thought the guidance was clear and informative.

However, some recipients reported issues with the guidance. For example:

- Those who could not read English reported having to rely on others to read and explain guidance because they were not aware it is available in other languages.

- Recipients called for information in the guidance to cover a fuller list of retailers where the Best Start Foods card can, and cannot, be used, and information on how to use the card online
- Some found the information overwhelming and would like the guidance in a more succinct format that was easier to digest.

Additionally, there was some confusion over the list of recommended Best Start Food items. Some recipients were not aware that the card could be used to buy frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables, pulses and eggs. Others thought it could be used for foods that were not on the recommended list (e.g. fish, poultry, meat and bread), or for other essential items such as nappies and clothes.

Commissioned research participants also discussed their knowledge of Best Start Foods prior to applying for the benefit, including their understanding of eligibility rules. Having been made aware of the benefit, some recipients had conducted their own research to find out more about Best Start Foods, whilst others received information from healthcare professionals who supported them to complete an application. However, some applied with little knowledge of eligibility criteria or the purpose of Best Start Foods. Awareness that Best Start Foods was part of a joint application with other benefits was also mixed. As mentioned above, those who did not know it was a joint application said they only became aware of Best Start Foods when they received a decision letter.

Some participants in the commissioned research also reported being caught off guard when their Best Start Foods payments stopped, as they received no prior warning. While there is information online that indicates that Best Start Foods will stop when a child turns 3, some recipients were unaware of this, or had forgotten.

Best Start Foods is taken up

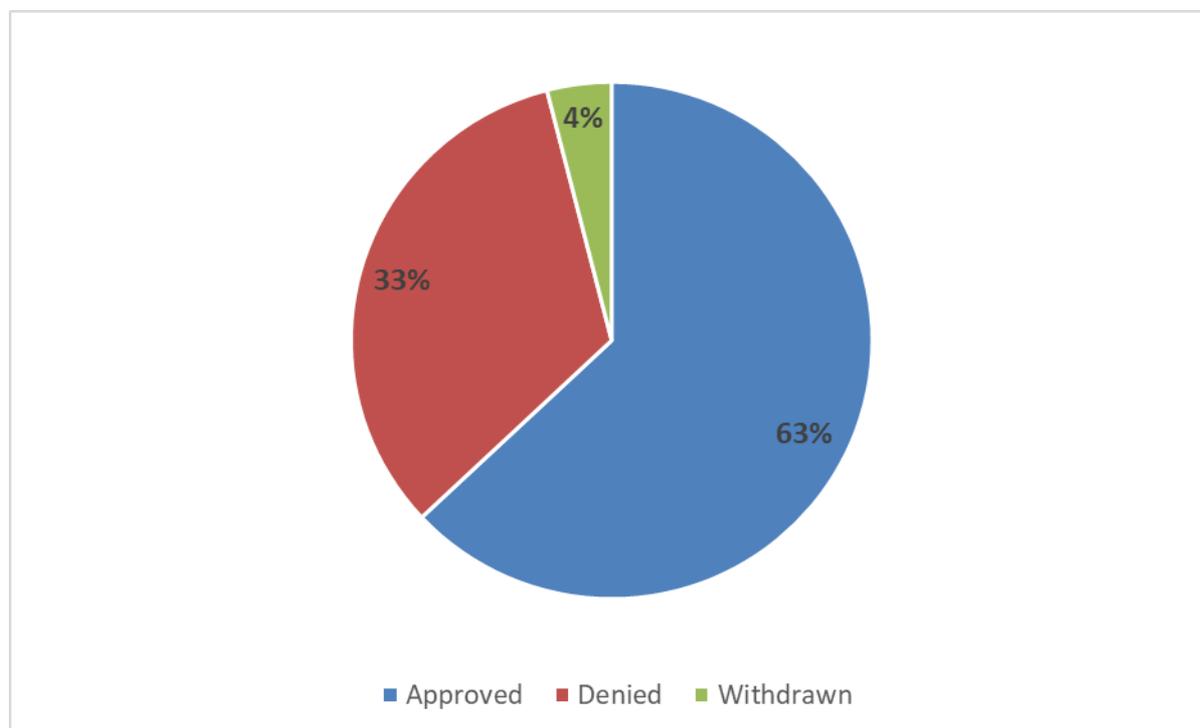
A direct way to assess progress on this outcome is to calculate the 'take-up' rate, which is the number of benefit recipients divided by the number of people eligible to receive the benefit. As mentioned above, take-up of Best Start Foods was estimated to be 77% over the period April 2020 to June 2021. This figure is similar to other low-income benefits administered by Social Security Scotland. For example, take-up for Scottish Child Payment was estimated to be 77%, and take-up for the Best Start Grants ranged from 79%-84%.

There are other ways to evaluate the overall reach of Best Start Foods. For example, Official Statistics show that for the period covering August 2019 to February 2022, 185,725 applications were estimated to have been made for Best Start Foods⁹, of which 174,905 had been processed. Amongst processed

⁹ Applicants make a joint application for Best Start Foods, Best Start Grant, and sometimes also Scottish Child Payment, without stating which of these specific benefit(s) they are applying for. Social Security Scotland determines which of the benefits applicants are eligible for (if any) based on details provided on the form. Applications are estimated as being for Best Start Foods if the application form was received on or after the payment went live and it contained details of dependent children within the eligibility age range or it contained details of a pregnancy.

applications, 63% were authorised, 33% were denied, and 4% were withdrawn (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Best Start Foods application outcomes - August 2019 to February 2022 (n=174,905)



Investigation of Social Security Scotland management information shows the most common reason why applications were denied is because the applicant was not in receipt of a qualifying benefit.

Official Statistics also show that 790 review requests¹⁰ were received from Best Start Foods applicants to the end of February 2022 - representing 0.3% of all decisions processed until that time. 780 of these reviews had been completed, of which:

- 325 were allowed or partially allowed
- 315 were disallowed and
- 135 were withdrawn.

Decisions on review requests (not including requests that were withdrawn by the applicant) took an average of 13 working days. This is within the 16 working days period in which Social Security Scotland must respond to review requests.

Another way to assess the take-up and overall reach of Best Start Foods is to consider the diversity of people applying for or receiving the benefit. This can be

¹⁰ Reviews can be requested by Best Start Foods applicants who have had their application denied, but disagree with the decision.

done by examining data on the demographics and individual characteristics of applicants.

Official Statistics show that Best Start Foods applications were submitted by people living in all 32 local authorities in Scotland. To February 2022, the highest local authorities were Glasgow City (30,330), North Lanarkshire (14,370), and Fife (13,900). The lowest were Na h-Eileanan Siar (530), Shetland Islands (375), and Orkney Islands (375).

Social Security Scotland client diversity and equalities analysis provides more information on the outcomes of applications by each of the equalities groups. Table 1 presents a secondary analysis of equalities data where recipients had their applications approved from December 2020 to May 2021. Please note the following about the secondary analysis in Table 1:

- The data is based on combined application outcomes for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods applications. This is because separate analysis of client diversity information is not conducted on Best Start Foods awards only.
- The percentages are calculated by dividing the number of approved applications for each variable category by the total number of approved applications. For example, the percentage of approved applications for 16-24 year olds shown in Table 1 (21%) is calculated by dividing the number of approved applications for 16-24 year olds (3,005) by the total approved applications (14,460).

A more detailed breakdown of the data in Table 1, with additional notes, is provided at Annex A.

Table 1 Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods equalities data for approved applications, December 2020 to May 2021 (n=14,460)

Category	%
Age	
16-24	21%
25-34	55%
35-44	22%
45-64	2%
65 and over	0%
Gender¹¹	
Woman	92%
Man	6%

¹¹ It is notable that the vast majority of those who receive Best Start Foods are women. This is to be expected – research has shown that women make up 95% of lone parents on Income Support, and provide around 70% of unpaid care of family members ([Engender, 2016: Securing Women's Futures: using Scotland's social security powers to close the gender equality gap](#)).

In another way	0%
Preferred not to say	2%
Physical or mental health condition or illness	
Yes	17%
No	76%
Preferred not to say	7%
Ethnicity	
White	90%
Asian	4%
African	2%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	1%
Other ethnic group	1%
Caribbean or black	0%
Preferred not to say	3%
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	92%
Gay & lesbian	0%
Bisexual	2%
In another way	0%
Prefer not to say	6%
Transgender	
Yes	0%
No	97%
Prefer not to say	3%
6-fold Urban Rural Classification¹²	
Large urban area	35%
Other urban area	41%
Accessible small town	7%
Remote small town	3%
Accessible rural area	9%
Remote rural area	4%
SIMD Quintile¹³	
1 (most deprived)	42%
2	26%

¹² Scottish Government (2018) [Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016](#).

¹³ Scottish Government (2020) [Scottish Index Multiple Deprivation 2020](#).

3	16%
4	11%
5 (least deprived)	5%
Residence on mainland or island communities	
Scottish Mainland	99%
Scottish Island	1%

Finally, secondary analysis of the most recently published Official Statistics provides a further insight into the reach of Best Start Foods. For example, to February 2022:

- 63% (69,710) of those who had their applications approved for Best Start Foods were assumed to be lone parents. However, since it is possible for applicants to not fill in information about their partners, overestimation of lone parents can occur and thus caution is needed when interpreting this figure.
- 1% (1,445) of those who had their applications approved for Best Start Foods were kinship carers. An applicant is considered to be a kinship carer if at least one child attached to their application has a kinship relationship status. Data regarding relationship status was missing for roughly 2% of children and thus these figures may slightly undercount total number of kinship applicants.

Further detail on this secondary analysis is provided at Annex A.

Making an application is clear and easy

Secondary analysis of the most recently published Official Statistics shows that, for all approved Best Start Foods applications to February 2022, 95,395 (87%) were made online, 12,495 (11%) were made on the telephone, and 2,180 (2%) were paper-based. Further detail on this secondary analysis is provided at Annex A.

The Client Survey asks respondents about their experience of the application process. Amongst those who completed the Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant application form:

- 56% said their experience of the application process overall was 'very good', and 33% said it was 'good' (i.e. 89% positive responses, n=955)
- 49% 'strongly agreed' that the application process was clear, and 44% 'agreed' (i.e. 93% positive responses, n=973).

In the commissioned research, Best Start Foods recipients generally found the application process straightforward and quick to complete. Those who completed an online application found the format convenient, and those who completed phone or paper applications appreciated being able to use different formats. Additionally, recipients saw the joint application form as beneficial as it saved them time filling out multiple application forms – albeit some felt applications should be separate as they may be eligible for the payments at different time points.

While the application form was generally viewed positively, some commissioned participants needed support to complete the form. This help came from different sources, such as Social Security Scotland, family nurses, case workers or family and friends. Participants who did not speak English at all, or as a second language, found it difficult to understand certain words or phrases. Some stated that they would like the option of choosing to receive communication (e.g. application form, decision letter, guidance) in other languages, or access to a translator.¹⁴ Healthcare professionals explained that some of their recipients had issues with literacy skills, access to technology, and in some cases generally lacked confidence to apply.

Applications and payments are processed in a timely manner

Secondary analysis of the most recently published Official Statistics shows that 109,69 Best Start Foods applications that were approved were processed between August 2019 and February 2022 (not including cases where a review was requested - i.e. approximately 0.3% of applications). Processing times are calculated from the point of initial benefit application until a decision on the application is made, and includes time spent waiting to receive copies of documents or evidence requested from applicants.

On the basis described above, a breakdown of Best Start Foods application processing times (in cases where applications were approved) is shown in Table 2, based on financial years.¹⁵ The data shows that application processing times have generally increased over time. For example, while 27% of approved applications took more than 20 working days to process in the 2019-20 financial year, this went up to 41% in 2020-21, and 51% in 2021-22. Further detail on this secondary analysis is provided at Annex A.

Table 2 Best Start Foods application processing times for approved applications (excluding those subject to reviews), by financial year

Financial year	Percentage within 10 working days	Percentage in 11-20 working days	Percentage in more than 20 working days	Median average processing time in working days
2019-20	26%	48%	27%	14
2020-21	26%	33%	41%	18
2021-22	24%	24%	51%	21

¹⁴ It is important to note that translation services including the use of interpreters are available through Social Security Scotland, and can be accessed by applicants throughout the application process. However, recipients participating in the commissioned research were unaware that these services were available. More information on these services can be found on the [Social Security Scotland - Benefits](#) web page.

¹⁵ Financial Year 2019-2020 includes the months from 12 August 2019 to March 2020. Financial Year 2020-2021 includes the months from April 2020 to March 2021. Financial Year 2021-2022 includes the months from April 2021 to February 2022.

The Client Survey asked respondents their opinion on (a) whether their application was handled within a reasonable timeframe, and (b) whether they got enough updates on the progress of their application. The answers for those who only applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant are provided in Table 3. They show that most felt that their applications were handled in a reasonable timeframe, and that they got enough progress updates on the progress of their applications. However:

- While 11% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that their application was handled in a reasonable timeframe,
- Only 17% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that they got enough updates on the progress of their applications.

These findings suggest that applicants were more likely to feel negatively about communications while waiting for a decision, compared to overall time spent waiting for a decision. It is also worth noting that amongst Client Survey respondents who only applied for Scottish Child Payment (n=742-744), only 4% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that their application was handled in a reasonable timeframe, and 9% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that they got enough progress updates on their applications.

The Client Survey also found that 34% of respondents who had only applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant (n=971) contacted Social Security Scotland to find out about the progress of their application, and 32% had done so to find out their application result.

Table 3 Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant applicants’ views on application processing times and updates

	Number of respondents	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My application was handled in a reasonable timeframe	943	6%	5%	6%	40%	42%
I got enough updates on the progress of my application	923	8%	9%	11%	37%	35%

In the commissioned research, participants were generally positive about the Best Start Foods application process. However, some reported challenges. The amount of time recipients said they waited on an application decision ranged from 2 to 12 weeks. Some of those who waited longer were concerned and anxious that they would not receive the benefit. On the other hand, those who received communication explaining that there may be delays in receiving a decision felt reassured and were more understanding of the longer waiting times.

Participants made suggestions to improve waiting times, including:

- Allowing applicants to submit evidence at the time of application¹⁶, as waiting for Social Security Scotland to request information and then finding and submitting evidence was viewed as time consuming
- Clarifying in advance the type of evidence that was required for applications
- Offering the option to receive notification of application decisions by email.

While some commissioned research participants were very positive about the communication and support they received from Social Security Scotland when they waited for an application decision, others encountered issues. For example, recipients and healthcare professionals reported long wait times when calling the Social Security Scotland helpline to enquire about applications. Healthcare professionals commented that some of the young parents they worked with lacked the confidence to pursue support for themselves, and due to these waiting times it was not always possible for them to sit with parents while they made the call.

Additionally, some recipients reported receiving multiple requests for the same information (i.e. supporting evidence) from Social Security Scotland, which they found stressful, and which led to delays in receiving Best Start Foods. Also, some who had their first application for Best Start Foods turned down said the letter did not explain why – which caused distress and meant they had to contact Social Security Scotland to find out more information.

According to Official Statistics, the total value of payments made to Best Start Foods recipients between August 2019 and February 2022 was £27,391,947. The Client Survey asked respondents questions about their experience of receiving payment(s). Amongst those who only received Best Start Foods (n=86) 80% rated their overall experience of receiving payments as “Very good” or “Good”, whilst 8% rated their experience as “Very poor” or “Poor”.

Recipients treated with dignity, fairness and respect

The Client Survey asked applicants directly about their experiences with Social Security Scotland, including how they felt they had been treated by the organisation. The responses from people who only applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start (see Table 4) show that a large majority ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they had been treated with dignity, fairness, and respect.

¹⁶ It should be noted that applicants can submit evidence at the time of application. As such, the issue could be that this needs to be made clearer to applicants.

Table 4 Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant applicants' treatment by Social Security Scotland

	Number of respondents	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I was treated with dignity	969	1%	1%	6%	41%	48%
I was treated with fairness	967	1%	2%	6%	41%	48%
I was treated with respect	965	1%	1%	6%	41%	49%

The Client Survey also shows that 44% of respondents who had only applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant (n=973) had been in contact with Social Security Scotland staff. Of the respondents who had been in contact with staff:

- 58% rated their experience with staff as very good
- 33% rated their experience as good
- 5% rated their experience with staff as poor or very poor.

Survey respondents were asked more questions about their interactions with staff. As shown in Table 5, large majorities of those who only applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant felt that (a) they had been treated with kindness by staff, (b) staff were able to help them, and (c) staff were knowledgeable about benefits.

Table 5 Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant applicants' thoughts on interactions with Social Security Scotland staff

	Number of respondents	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I was treated with kindness	421	1%	1%	4%	37%	56%
Staff were able to help me	421	3%	4%	6%	35%	50%
Staff were knowledgeable about benefits	418	3%	3%	6%	37%	49%

The Client Survey also asked whether respondents felt that they had been discriminated against at any point during their experience with Social Security Scotland. Amongst those who only applied for Best Start Foods/Best Start Grant (n=760), 2% said they had been discriminated against, whilst 4% preferred not to say.

Card reduces stigma and is easy to use

The commissioned research explored whether the Best Start Foods card has reduced stigma compared to Healthy Start Vouchers, and whether it is easy to use.

Overall, the Best Start Foods card was viewed positively by recipients, retailers and healthcare professionals, and was favoured over the previous Healthy Start Vouchers system. Recipients preferred the card format because it was more discreet – those that had previously received the Healthy Start Vouchers reported feeling embarrassed and judged by others when using them in shops.

Recipients also reported that the card format was easier and more convenient to use than vouchers. Reasons they gave included:

- It allowed them to use contactless payment and Chip & Pin, which also enabled them to use self-checkout
- There was no expiry date on the monthly payments - anything that was not used stayed on the card
- It was familiar to recipients who did not speak English, and did not require them to be able to speak or read English to use it.

While most found using the Best Start Foods card to be straightforward, some recipients experienced challenges. They reported instances of having the card rejected the first time they tried to use it, which could cause embarrassment. This was particularly confusing in cases where the card was rejected in a shop which had previously accepted Healthy Start Vouchers. Reasons given for card rejections included that:

- The card had not been activated (either because the client had not read, or was unable to read, the guidance)
- The client tried to use contactless for the first transaction (the PIN needs to be used for the first transaction)
- Some shops were not verified to accept Best Start Foods (e.g. because they are not classified as food shops)

There were also recipients who reported experiencing challenges using contactless payment in stores, and were always asked to enter their PIN. If they had forgotten their PIN as they would need to call allpay to retrieve it or resort to using another card. Notably, some faced barriers to calling allpay – e.g. if they did not speak English, had hearing impairments, or struggled with phone calls. To address these barriers, recipients suggested introducing an app for card management.¹⁷

Retailers also thought the card format was an improvement and easier for them to implement than vouchers. With Healthy Start Vouchers, retailers had to scan and keep the vouchers and then submit them to receive payment, but with Best Start Foods they received payment automatically. However, while retailers were generally positive about the Best Start Foods card, they also found it challenging not having any information on the use of Best Start Foods in their shop(s). They

¹⁷ It should be noted that Allpay currently do not have an app for the card management but the website is mobile optimised, which means that it works like an app via the website.

said that data on the items being bought and how often would enable them to make informed choices on stock and in store promotions.

Card provides access to a wide range of retailers

Participants in the commissioned research used the Best Start Foods card in a wide range of shops, including large and small supermarket chains, smaller franchises and local independent shops.¹⁸ There was also the perception that the Best Start Foods card could be used in a greater variety of shops to buy a wider range of foods than the previous Healthy Start Vouchers. This enabled recipients to choose to shop at different retailers to find the lowest prices.

Despite the above, recipients called for information in the guidance to cover a fuller list of retailers where the Best Start Foods card can, and cannot, be used. Participants also called for more information about using Best Start Foods online - there was a lack of awareness that the card could be used this way, and uncertainty over how shopping online would work. For example, recipients did not know how they would go about splitting the payment for recommended items and other items, or whether the card could be used to pay for delivery.

Card provides access to a wide range of healthy foods

Participants in the commissioned research expressed contrasting views on the recommended range of food items which could be bought using Best Start Foods. Some thought the range was appropriate and reasonable, allowing them to buy essential foods for their children, prepare healthy meals, and eat a healthier diet. However, while recipients reported that Best Start Foods allowed them to buy a wider range of healthy items than Healthy Start Vouchers, some felt that expanding the range further would be beneficial. Items which are good sources of protein (e.g. meat, poultry), fibre (e.g. wholegrains) and other nutrients (e.g. fish) were seen to be essential for a healthy diet for their children. Recipients also mentioned that catering for children with special dietary needs (allergies and intolerances) was expensive and they were uncertain whether Best Start Foods could be used to purchase items such as milk alternatives (e.g. oat milk).

Overall, healthcare professionals' views on the range of foods were positive. When informed of the additional foods that recipients could buy with Best Start Foods that were not included with Healthy Start Vouchers, they were pleased that foods such as pulses were included, because they provide protein which is important for children's healthy development. However, there were healthcare professionals that raised concerns that the range of foods recipients could purchase was restrictive and did not reflect the eating habits and cooking skills of their clients. There was a view that young recipients in particular do not have the skills or confidence to cook healthy meals from scratch, so they opt for pre-made baby food or meals. It was

¹⁸ Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Farmfoods, Iceland, Lidl, McColl's, Morrisons, Nisa, Premier, Sainsbury's, Scot Fresh, Spar, Tesco, local shops (including corner shops, African shops)

therefore a concern that limiting what can be purchased with the Best Start Foods card would lead to greater difficulties with promoting healthy eating habits.

Achievement against short-term policy outcomes

This section evaluates Best Start Foods against the following policy outcomes:

- Healthy foods are more affordable
- Supports healthier shopping habits and meal planning
- Mothers and children eat more healthy foods
- Reduced pressure on household finances

It is based on findings from bespoke commissioned research, but also draws on findings from the Client Survey where possible.

Healthy foods are more affordable

Client Survey respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 0-10 ('not at all' to 'a lot'), how much their benefit payment helped them to pay for what they needed. The average score given by respondents who had received Best Start Foods (n=86) was 6.7 out of 10. This figure indicates that the benefit generally helped people to pay for what they needed, without necessarily covering all of their costs.

The commissioned research shows that Best Start Foods has helped families to pay for healthy foods, enabling them to purchase better quality and fresher fruit and vegetables. Recipients reported using it to mainly buy cow's milk, baby formula, fresh fruit and vegetables. Some also used it for other recommended items (e.g. eggs, pulses, and frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables). In addition, they mentioned using the BSFs card to buy a range of items not included on the recommended list (e.g. bread, pasta, fish, poultry and meat). They also used the BSFs card to buy some non-food items (e.g. nappies, baby toiletries and clothes).

Recipients also felt happy knowing they no longer had to pick the cheapest options if they did not want to. Since receiving the benefit, these participants could afford to buy less frozen and processed foods and replace it with fresh fruit and vegetables. Healthcare professionals that felt that Best Start Foods made a particular difference to their clients' ability to afford formula milk as it is more expensive in comparison to fruit and vegetables.

However, whilst participants generally felt that Best Start Foods had made healthy eating more affordable, opinions were varied on the different Best Start Foods payment values. Some felt the different payment values were suitable and understood that payments were higher when a child is born to help compensate for the cost of formula milk (though they did not know it was higher to also support breastfeeding mothers). However, others highlighted that their food expenses did not change as their child aged. Children became used to, for example, having fruit as a healthy snack and recipients found it difficult to adjust their shopping once their payment dropped. Both recipients and healthcare professionals felt that cutting the

payment amounts in half when a child turns one would sacrifice the quality and the amount of fruit and vegetables that are bought.

Supports healthier shopping habits and meal planning

In the commissioned research, healthcare professionals and recipients reported that Best Start Foods has enabled families to make healthier food choices. Being able to afford to buy more fruit and vegetables encouraged participants to purchase healthier snacks, such as different types of fruit for their children instead of processed and unhealthy foods like crisps. Best Start Foods also had an impact on recipients' healthy eating in terms of trying new recipes. There were recipients who said that receiving Best Start Foods enabled them to experiment with preparing new types of meals in order to incorporate more fruit and vegetables into their children's diets. Healthcare professionals reported that families that had not previously eaten a lot of fruit and vegetables were excited about trying different healthy foods and new recipes as a result of receiving Best Start Foods.

Despite these positive changes, there were participants that perceived that receiving Best Start Foods had made no difference to the type of foods they purchased, their meal planning, or shopping habits. These recipients were already purchasing fruit, vegetables and milk prior to Best Start Foods and felt they were already eating healthily as a family. However, for some recipients, while they regularly bought milk, fruit and vegetables as part of their shopping, Best Start Foods enabled them to buy these healthy items in greater quantities.

Mothers and children eat more healthy foods

According to the commissioned research, in addition to being able to buy a greater quantity of healthy foods, Best Start Foods allowed participants the financial capacity to buy a wider range of fruits and vegetables for their children to try. Prior to receiving Best Start Foods this would not have been considered, as participants would not purchase foods that they were uncertain their children would enjoy or that they did not enjoy themselves. Their reasoning was that they could not afford to waste food or money if their children decided they did not want to eat it. Best Start Foods has therefore given recipients the financial freedom to ensure their own and their children's diets are varied as well as giving their children enjoyable experiences when trying new foods. Being able to afford a wider variety of foods was particularly beneficial for participants whose children had food intolerances, digestive problems or were fussy eaters as catering for them could be expensive.

Best Start Foods also allowed recipients to reconsider their own attitudes towards healthy eating. This was particularly the case for participants who did not eat a lot of fruit and vegetables when they were younger. Watching their children's excitement in trying new fruits and vegetables made recipients realise the importance of providing their children with a variety of healthy foods. This impact was also reflected by healthcare professionals, who reported having more discussions with families about their attitudes towards healthy eating. Best Start Foods had helped change their mindset and recipients were excited to share their own and their children's experiences of trying new fruit and vegetables with the healthcare professionals.

Reduced pressure on household finances

Client Survey respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 0-10 ('not at all' to 'a lot'), how much their benefit payment helped them to control their finances. The average score given by respondents who had only received Best Start Foods (n=86) was 6.5 out of 10. This figure indicates that the benefit generally helped people to control their finances, without necessarily having a transformative impact in all cases.

The commissioned research shows that, overall, Best Start Foods had helped to reduce pressure on household finances. Some recipients said that when finances were difficult they worried about not being able to buy food. As such, Best Start Foods provided reassurance they could buy essential foods for their children. In these circumstances the Best Start Foods card was described as a "safety net" or "lifesaver".

For some recipients the benefit also offered some relief in terms of other household expenses. It meant that families could focus on using their other income to pay for utilities and other family or household expenditure. In some cases Best Start Foods was considered a massive help in meeting the costs of their household expenses, and they considered the benefit to be a kind of financial lifeline. Healthcare professionals recalled recipients telling them that Best Start Foods had been their only source of income between receiving Universal Credit payments.

Some relied on Best Start Foods to a lesser extent, and used the card only when they were running particularly low financially. In these instances, healthcare professionals believed that Best Start Foods was useful in providing families with additional income but that it was not necessarily life altering. For some households, Best Start Foods enabled them to set aside money, in some cases for the first time, that would have previously been spent on food and used it to buy other items for their children (e.g. clothes or art supplies). However, when the payment dropped after their child turned one, recipients reported finding it harder to redirect funds in the same way.

Finally, while recipients were appreciative of the financial support offered by Best Start Foods, they felt the impact would be even greater if eligibility for Best Start Foods was extended until their child starts school. Participants shared that their personal circumstances meant that they would find it difficult to cover the costs of nutritious food after Best Start Foods came to an end.

Achievement against medium-term policy outcomes

This section evaluates Best Start Foods against the following policy outcomes:

- Reduced incidence of food insecurity
- Increased healthy eating behaviours
- Improved health and wellbeing for children and mothers

It uses data from bespoke commissioned research. However, a full evaluation against these outcomes would require: (a) more time to have passed since the benefit was implemented, and (b) access to more robust quantitative data.

Reduced incidence of food insecurity

As mentioned earlier in the findings section, Client Survey respondents who received Best Start Foods gave the benefit an average score of 6.7 out of 10 when asked if it helped them to pay for what they needed (where 0 is not at all and 10 is a lot). This could be viewed as an indirect way to assess whether Best Start Foods has reduced food insecurity. The score indicates that the benefit has generally helped people to pay for what they need, but that this is not necessarily the case for everyone all of the time.

Also discussed previously, the commissioned research shows that Best Start Foods has helped recipients to access a greater quantity (and a wider range) of healthy foods. Additionally, some recipients said that they worried about being able to pay for food when their finances were difficult, and that Best Start Foods had provided reassurance that they could always buy essential food for their children. This evidence also suggests that the benefit may have helped to reduce food insecurity. However, the testimony of recipients and healthcare professionals also indicates that when the payment amount drops (i.e. when eligible children turn 1) it has a negative impact on the quality and the amount of fruit and vegetables that families can buy.

Increased healthy eating behaviours

The commissioned research indicates that Best Start Foods has led to increased healthy eating behaviours. As discussed earlier in the findings section, the benefit has allowed recipients to (a) purchase a greater quantity and quality of healthy foods, (b) experiment with preparing new types of meals in order to incorporate more fruit and vegetables into their children's diets, and (c) ensure their own and their children's diets are varied, as a result of having less financial constraints.

Improved health and wellbeing for children and mothers

In the commissioned research, participants reported a number of positive ways Best Start Foods had impacted on their children's health and wellbeing. Firstly, they observed their children eating more and a greater variety of fruits and vegetables. This was viewed positively as fruit and vegetables are good for them nutritionally and support their development. Best Start Foods also had a positive impact on how recipients felt about providing for their family. They reflected on a desire to provide their children with the nutrients they needed and were pleased that they could accomplish this with the Best Start Foods card.

Recipients also experienced reduced levels of stress and anxiety in relation to finances as a result of receiving the Best Start Foods card. It had given participants a sense of relief knowing they could use it to buy healthy foods for their families. This freed up their own money to pay for other household bills or purchase essential non-food items. They also expressed relief as Best Start Foods enabled recipients to be financially independent, whereas they previously had to ask for

support from other family members. This was reiterated by healthcare professionals who observed that their recipients were less burdened by financial worries. Healthcare professionals were pleased to see the positive impact Best Start Foods was having on the health and wellbeing of families as a preoccupation with finances could impact the relationship they had with their children.

The practical use of a prepaid card was also discussed as having an impact on the mental wellbeing of Best Start Foods recipients. Participants who had previously received Healthy Start Vouchers reported a positive impact on how they felt when it was replaced with Best Start Foods. They shared that they felt less anxious or self-conscious going into shops compared to when they received Healthy Start Vouchers. Additionally, participants that experienced mental health problems appreciate the option to use the card online, which for some was seen as more convenient and comfortable.

Evidence of progress towards long-term outcomes for children and their families

As set out in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan² and Scotland's healthy weight and diet delivery plan³, the Scottish Government has been delivering support for families and children which is intended to contribute to the following long-term government outcomes:

- Reduced health inequalities
- Reduced child poverty

Best Start Foods will make an important contribution towards these targets. However, it will not play an exclusive role. Measuring the impact of Best Start Foods would also require (a) suitable time to have passed since the benefit was introduced, and (b) access to more robust and suitable quantitative data than is currently available. It should also be noted, however, that isolating the specific role of Best Start Foods would be challenging even with additional data.

Nevertheless, the Scottish Government does publish [child poverty statistics](#), which can be used to monitor general progress towards its stated targets. In addition, it can be reasonably expected that success against Best Start Foods' immediate, short-term, and medium-term policy outcomes could contribute to the Scottish Government achieving its long-term outcomes. Based on the evidence presented in this report, the following summary of progress can be made.

Progress towards immediate outcomes

- Best Start Foods is claimed by people (predominantly women) from across Scotland who possess a wide range demographic characteristics.
- As of June 2021, it was estimated that a majority of eligible people had claimed the benefit. However, almost 1 in 4 eligible people had not taken it up.

- People find out about Best Start Foods via a range of sources, including paid advertising. However, there is a perception that there are families, healthcare professionals and retailers who have little or no awareness of the benefit.
- Some people do not realise Best Start Foods is part of a joint application with other benefits, and only find out about the benefit when they receive a decision letter on their claim. Some people also do not realise Best Start Foods payments will stop when their child turns 3.
- The purpose of Best Start Foods is well-understood, and guidance on using the card is generally felt to be clear and informative. However, there are perceived issues with the guidance information e.g. that it does not provide a fuller list of participating retailers, or it is not clear that it comes in other languages.
- Most find the application form easy and quick to complete. However, some need support to apply e.g. due to poor literacy skills or not being able to read English.
- Most feel well treated by Social Security Scotland, and report positive interactions with staff.
- While most feel their application is processed in a reasonable timeframe, processing times have increased each year. Also with regards to the application process:
 - Recipients sometimes experience long waiting times when trying to phone Social Security Scotland about their application progress
 - Some receive multiple requests for the same supporting information for their application
 - There is a perception that outcome letters do not provide a clear explanation for application decisions in cases where applications are denied.
- People feel less stigma using the Best Start Foods card compared with the former Healthy Start Vouchers scheme. Recipients and retailers also feel the card system is more convenient. However, some people experience technical issues with cards e.g. contactless payments not working.
- It is felt that Best Start Foods can be used in a wider range of retailers than Healthy Start Vouchers. However, there is a lack of awareness that Best Start Foods can be used online, and uncertainty about how online shopping would work with the card.
- There are contrasting views over the range of recommended foods that can be purchased with the card. While some recipients feel it is appropriate, others feel it could be expanded to include other items e.g. meat, wholegrains and fish.

Progress towards short-term outcomes

- Best Start Foods helps people to buy more (and better quality) healthy foods. However, some recipients and healthcare professionals feel that cutting the

payment amount in half when a child turns 1 can sacrifice the quality and the amount of fruit and vegetables that are bought.

- Best Start Foods supports healthier shopping habits and meal planning. For example, it encourages recipients to buy healthier snacks for their children, and to prepare new meals which incorporate more fruit and vegetables into their children's diets. Healthcare professionals report that families are excited about trying different healthy foods since receiving the payments.
- Best Start Foods lets recipients try new foods and provide a more varied diet for their children, with less fear of wasting food or money. The benefit also encourages recipients to reconsider their own attitudes towards healthy eating.
- The benefit has generally reduced financial pressure on households. For some it is a 'lifesaver', assuring them that they can always provide essential food for their children when finances are difficult. It allows some recipients to focus their remaining income on other expenses (e.g. utilities or clothes for their children). However, some recipients are less reliant on the benefit.
- There is a feeling amongst recipients and healthcare professionals that the impact of Best Start Foods would be greater if payments extended until children start school.

Progress towards medium-term outcomes

Medium-term outcomes cannot be fully evaluated until (a) more time has passed since Best Start Foods was implemented and (b) more robust quantitative data has been obtained. However, the following summary can be made based on existing evidence:

- Best Start Foods has allowed recipients to buy more healthy foods, and reassures them that they can always afford essential foods for their children. It is therefore likely it has led to reduced incidence of food insecurity.
- Payments have allowed people to spend more on healthy foods, buy children healthier snacks, and experiment with new healthy recipes. It is therefore likely that Best Start Foods has led to increased healthy eating behaviours.
- Recipients feel that their children's health and wellbeing has improved as a result of eating a more nutritious diet. It is therefore likely that Best Start Foods has led to improved health and wellbeing for children and mothers. Recipients also report:
 - Feeling positive that they can provide healthy foods for their children,
 - Less anxiety and stress over their financial situation
 - Less self-conscious using the payment card compared to vouchers.

This summary shows that positive progress has been made against immediate and short-term Best Start Foods outcomes. It also indicates that positive steps have been made towards its medium-term outcomes. In combination, it can be reasonably assumed that Best Start Foods is making some contribution towards the Scottish Government's long-term aims for children and families.

However, the evaluation has also highlighted that there are some outstanding issues with the benefit. Implications are discussed in the conclusion chapter below.

Conclusion

The purpose of the interim evaluation was to:

1. Evaluate the extent to which Best Start Foods has met its policy outcomes.
2. Assess the likely contribution of Best Start Foods to wider long-term government outcomes for children and their families.
3. Discuss implications for future policy development.

The first two of these has been achieved by reviewing the available evidence on Best Start Foods, drawn from different sources (primarily bespoke commissioned research carried out by ScotCen, Official Statistics, and Social Security Scotland research). As discussed above, Best Start Foods has made good progress towards some of its immediate and short-term, and medium-term outcomes. Based on this progress, it is reasonable to assume that the policy is also contributing towards the government's long-term aims of reduced health inequalities and reduced child poverty.

Despite these positive developments, the evaluation has also highlighted some areas where Best Start Foods could be improved to achieve better outcomes for recipients. These are outlined below.

Policy implications for Best Start Foods

Please note that these implications have been drawn from the commissioned research report by ScotCen, which is available in the full in Annex B. However, they also take into account the wider evidence from Official Statistics and Social Security Scotland research which has been presented throughout this report. They are as follows:

1. There could be a need to (a) undertake further promotional work for Best Start Foods, and (b) maximise take-up of the benefit amongst eligible people.

The evaluation indicates that the majority of people who were eligible for Best Start Foods applied for the benefit. However, recipients and stakeholders feel that further efforts could be made to promote Best Start Foods amongst families, healthcare professionals, and retailers – some of whom they feel do know about the benefit. Indeed, the most recent estimate indicates around 1 in 4 eligible people did not claim Best Start Foods as of June 2021. Therefore, it may be necessary to undertake further promotions of the benefit, and maximise take-up amongst eligible people.

2. There could be a need to (a) improve knowledge of Best Start Foods amongst applicants, and (b) make it clearer when Best Start Foods payments will end.

On becoming aware of Best Start Foods (e.g. via advertising or word of mouth) some people do their own research on the benefit, or are told more about it by someone supporting them to make a claim (e.g. a healthcare professional). However, there are cases where people only become aware of the Best Start Foods when they receive an application decision letter, and not all applicants realise it is part of a joint application with other benefits. Additionally, some do not realise that payments will stop when their child turns 3. As such, it may be necessary to improve knowledge of Best Start Foods amongst applicants, and communicate more clearly to recipients when payments will stop.

3. There could be a need to review the guidance given to recipients, and make alterations where necessary.

The guidance letter given to Best Start Foods recipients is generally considered to be clear and informative, and the list of recommended items printed on the card is also felt to be a helpful reminder for recipients when they are shopping. However, the evaluation highlights some issues with the guidance, as reported by recipients – e.g. that it is not clear that it comes in other languages, does not contain a comprehensive list of shops where the card can be used, or that the information is overwhelming and could be more succinct. There is also some confusion amongst recipients on what is on the recommended list of items, and a general lack of awareness that the card can be used for online shopping. As such, it may be necessary to review the content of the guidance given to recipients of Best Start Foods, to determine whether clarifications and improvements can be made.

4. There could be a need to review specific aspects of the application process to make it easier for applicants.

In general, the Best Start Foods application form is considered easy and quick to complete. Being able to use different formats (i.e. online, phone, and paper) is appreciated by applicants, and people generally view the joint application as being positive because it saves them completing multiple forms. However, the evaluation also highlights that some people need support when filling out the Best Start Foods application – e.g. due to difficulties understanding English and issues with literacy skills. More issues are highlighted in the commissioned research report at Annex B. It should be noted that it is not clear how widespread these issues are amongst applicants. However, the application process could be reviewed to see if changes are necessary or possible. For example, while the application process does have a range of accessibility features (e.g. the digital application process is compatible with assistive technologies, and clients can request phone calls and letters in a variety of formats e.g. in over 100 different languages) the evaluation findings suggest that more could be done to signpost users towards these features.

5. Where possible, steps could be taken to (a) review application processing times and the process of collecting supporting evidence from applicants, and (b) improve communications and helpline waiting times after applications are submitted.

The evaluation has shown that Best Start Foods application processing times have increased each year since the benefit was introduced, and that lengthy waiting times can make applicants feel anxious if they are not informed about possible delays. Other issues with the application process reported by recipients include:

- There can be long waiting times when calling the Social Security Scotland helpline to enquire about application progress.
- There are cases where people are asked on multiple occasions by Social Security Scotland staff for the same supporting evidence.
- Application outcome letters do not clearly explain reasons for decisions in cases where applications are denied.

As such, it may be necessary to review the application process to determine whether (a) decision making can be expedited and the evidence gathering process improved, and (b) communications can be improved to keep people better informed about the progress of claims - including reduced helpline waiting times, and clearer application outcome letters.

6. There could be a need to review the recommended list of food items which can be bought with Best Start Foods.

Best Start Foods has helped recipients to purchase a greater quantity (and quality) of healthy foods. However, there are mixed views about the scope of the recommended food items that can be purchased with Best Start Foods. While there are recipients and healthcare professionals who view the range positively, others feel it is too restrictive because it does not contain foods they feel are also healthy (e.g. fish and wholegrains), or may not cater for children with special dietary needs. Healthcare professionals also raised concerns that the items do not reflect the eating habits of their clients – who may lack the skills or confidence to cook healthy meals from scratch. As such, it may be necessary to review the range of food items recommended to people who receive Best Start Foods, and extend it if appropriate.

7. It may be necessary to (a) clarify guidance on using the Best Start Foods card for the first time, and (b) investigate technical issues with contactless payments.

Best Start Foods card reduces stigma amongst recipients when compared with the previous Healthy Start Vouchers system. It is also considered easy and convenient to use e.g. due to there being no expiry date on payments, and the availability of contactless payments. However, some recipients have experienced challenges using the card. For example, there can be confusion when using the card for the first time if it has not been activated, or if the recipient attempts to make a contactless payment (Chip & Pin must be used for the first transaction). Additionally, some recipients report always having to use Chip & Pin in shops, due to issues with contactless payments. As such, there may be a need to provide clearer guidance on how to use the card for the first time, and to investigate technical issues with contactless payments.

8. Steps could be taken to explore whether is possible to provide retailers with more information about how Best Start Foods is used in their store.

Retailers consider Best Start Foods to be an improvement on the Healthy Start Vouchers scheme e.g. because they receive Best Start Foods payments automatically, instead of having to keep and submit vouchers to obtain payment. However, they also find it challenging not having any information on the use of Best Start Foods in their shop(s). They said this data would enable them to make informed choices on stock and in store promotions. As such, steps could be taken to provide retailers with more information on how people use Best Start Foods, if possible.

9. The impact of Best Start Foods on recipients' financial situation should continue to be monitored, and the rate of payment kept under review.

Best Start Foods is generally considered a helpful contribution towards the cost of healthy foods. It helps to reduce the financial pressure on households and for some it is a lifeline that ensures they can afford essential food for their children when they experience financial difficulties. However, some recipients find it difficult to afford the same quantity of healthy foods when payments reduce (i.e. when their child turns 1). It is therefore important that recipients' perceptions of impact should continue to be monitored to ensure the benefit remains a helpful contribution to costs. The rate of Best Start Foods should also kept under review.

10. More data is required to fully evaluate progress towards Best Start Foods outcomes.

It has been touched on throughout this report that there is currently a lack of data to fully evaluate the medium-term outcomes of Best Start Foods, and assess its contribution to longer-term government aims (e.g. reduced health inequalities). For example, the evaluation provides some evidence that Best Start Foods reduces food insecurity. However, the true impact of Best Start Foods on food insecurity amongst people on low incomes cannot be objectively assessed with the available evidence. This is similar for other policy outcomes, such as the benefit's impact on health and wellbeing, and increased healthy eating behaviours. Continued efforts should therefore be made to obtain data to fully evaluate the progress of Best Start Foods towards its stated outcomes.

Annex A: Additional statistical information

Notes which apply to more than one statistical table are presented at the beginning of Annex A, as can be seen below. Notes which apply to only one statistical table are presented underneath the relevant table.

Notes – all tables

- Figures are rounded for disclosure control and may not sum due to rounding.
- Figures have been rounded to the nearest one percent – figures may not sum due to rounding.
- Most results are presented to zero decimal places. '0%' should therefore be interpreted to mean less than 0.5%. If no responses were given then this is denoted by '-'.

Notes – tables 1-9

- This supplementary analysis was carried out using the same data used in the production of the [Social Security Scotland client diversity and equalities analysis to May 2021](#).

Notes – tables 10-13

- This supplementary analysis was carried out using the same data used in the production of the [Best Start Grant Official Statistics](#) publication.

Notes – tables 11-13

- Financial Year 2019-2020 includes the months from 12 August 2019 to March 2020. Financial Year 2020-2021 includes the months from April 2020 to March 2021. Financial Year 2021-2022 includes the months from April 2021 to February 2022.

1. Number of approved applications by age-group, December 2020 to May 2021

Age-group	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
16-24	3,005	21%
25-34	7,970	55%
35-44	3,200	22%
45-64	285	2%
65 and over	5	0%
Unknown	-	-
Total	14,460	100%

2. Number of approved applications by Gender, December 2020 to May 2021

Gender	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
Man	915	6%
Woman	13,235	92%
In another way	5	0%
Prefer not to say	305	2%
Unknown	-	-
Total	14,460	100%

3. Number of approved applications by Physical or Mental Health Condition, December 2020 to May 2021

Physical or Mental Health Condition	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
Yes	2,415	17%
No	11,060	76%
Prefer not to say	985	7%
Unknown	-	-
Total	14,460	100%

4. Number of approved applications by Ethnicity, December 2020 to May 2021

Ethnicity	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
White	13,060	90%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	100	1%
Asian	520	4%
African	225	2%
Caribbean or Black	15	0%
Other ethnic group	130	1%
Prefer not to say	415	3%
Unknown	5	0%
Total	14,460	100%

5. Number of approved applications by Sexual orientation, December 2020 to May 2021

Sexual orientation	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
Heterosexual	13,260	92%
Gay & Lesbian	45	0%
Bisexual	285	2%
In another way	50	0%
Prefer not to say	820	6%
Unknown	5	0%
Total	14,460	100%

6. Number of approved applications by Transgender, December 2020 to May 2021

Transgender	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
Yes	35	0%
No	14,015	97%
Prefer not to say	410	3%
Unknown	5	0%
Total	14,460	100%

7. Number of approved applications by Urban Rural, December 2020 to May 2021

Urban Rural	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
1 -Large Urban Areas	5,080	35%
2 -Other Urban Area	5,875	41%
3 -Accessible Small Town	1,080	7%
4 -Remote Small Town	495	3%
5 -Accessible Rural Area	1,315	9%
6 -Remote Rural Area	575	4%
Unknown - Scottish	30	0%
Unknown - Other	10	0%
Total	14,460	100%

Notes – table 7

- In Social Security Scotland client diversity and equalities analysis Urban Rural data is presented based on the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification, 8-fold. In Table 7 it is based on the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification, 6-fold. The 6-fold data in Table 6 has been calculated by aggregating the following items from the 8-fold data:

- '4 - Remote Small Town', and '5 - Very Remote Small Town'
- '7 - Remote Rural Area', and '8 - Very Remote Rural Area'

8. Number of approved applications by SIMD Quintile, December 2020 to May 2021

SIMD quintile	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
1	6,020	42%
2	3,810	26%
3	2,305	16%
4	1,585	11%
5	705	5%
Unknown – Scottish	30	0%
Unknown – Other	10	0%
Total	14,460	100%

Notes – table 8

- In Social Security Scotland client diversity and equalities analysis SIMD data is presented based on SIMD Deciles. In Table 8 it is based on SIMD Quintiles. SIMD Quintiles data in Table 8 has been calculated by aggregating the following from the SIMD Deciles data:
 - Deciles 1 and 2 data, for Quintile 1
 - Deciles 3 and 4 data, for Quintile 2
 - Deciles 5 and 6 data, for Quintile 3
 - Deciles 7 and 8 data, for Quintile 4
 - Deciles 9 and 10 data, for Quintile 5.

9. Number of approved applications by Islands, December 2020 to May 2021

Islands	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of approved applications
Scotland – Island	160	1%
Scotland – Mainland	14,260	99%
Scotland – Unknown	30	0%
Other	10	0%
Total	14,460	100%

10. Number of approved applications by whether an applicant is a lone parent or not, all time – up to 28 February 2022

Lone parent status	Total number of approved applications	Total percentage of applications
Assumed lone parent	69,710	63%
Assumed partnership	40,505	37%
Total	110,220	100%

Notes – table 10

- Whether an applicant is assumed to be lone parent or not is based on the presence (or absence) of a data field called "Partner Flag". Since it is possible for applicants to not fill in information about their partners, overestimation of lone parents can occur and thus caution is needed when interpreting these figures.
- Whilst the vast majority of applications are from parents of children, some of the applications counted in these tables are from applicants with a different relationship to the child (e.g. grandparent, kinship carer etc.)

11. Number of approved applications for kinship carers, per financial year (rounded)

Kinship carer	Total number of approved applications
2019-20	315
2020-21	690
2021-22	440
All time	1,445

Notes – table 11

- An applicant is considered to be a kinship carer if at least one child attached to their application has a kinship relationship status. Data regarding relationship status was missing for roughly 2% of children and thus these figures may slightly undercount total number of kinship applicants

12. Number of approved applications by application channel, per financial year (Best Start Foods decision date)

	Online	Paper	Phone	Unknown	Total
2019-20	95,395	2,180	12,495	150	110,220
2020-21	25,810	265	4,215	70	30,360
2021-22	42,070	1,055	3,310	35	46,475
All time	27,510	865	4,970	40	33,385

Notes – table 12

- Where application channel has been manually entered incorrectly, application channel has been classed as 'unknown'.

13. Processing times for approved applications, per financial year

Financial year	0-10 working days	11-20 working days	21 or more working days	Average (median) processing time in working days
2019-20	7,750	14,375	8,015	14
2020-21	11,800	15,405	19,010	18
2021-22	8,145	8,085	17,110	21
All time	27,695	37,865	44,135	18

Notes – table 13

- Processing time is calculated in working days, and public holidays are excluded, even if applications were processed by staff working overtime on these days. Processing time is only calculated for applications that were decided by 28 February 2022, and does not include any applications that are flagged as having had a redetermination request. The number of applications processed in this table is therefore lower than the number of decisions shown in other tables. Both Best Start Foods and Best Start Grant applications are being processed at the same time.
- Median average has been used. The median is the middle value of an ordered dataset, or the point at which half of the values are higher and half of the values are lower.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact social_research@gov.scot for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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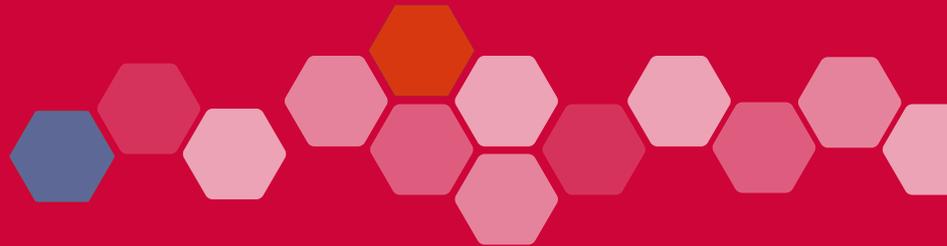
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This document is also available from our website at www.gov.scot.
ISBN: 978-1-80435-766-8

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Produced for
the Scottish Government
by APS Group Scotland
PPDAS1127182 (07/22)
Published by
the Scottish Government,
July 2022



Social Research series
ISSN 2045-6964
ISBN 978-1-80435-766-8

Web Publication
www.gov.scot/socialresearch

PPDAS1127182 (07/22)