



Maternal and Child Health Network Policy Briefing 1:

Welfare Grants in Pregnancy and Early Childhood

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Introduction

The Maternal and Child Health Network aims to harness cross-country administrative data to evaluate national policy impacts on maternal, infant and child health, and health inequalities across the 4 UK nations.

MatCHNet's briefings and reports provide baseline knowledge in the areas of policy, data, and methods relevant to early years policy evaluations.

MatCHNet's policy briefings and reports aim to compare early years policy variations across the 4 UK nations to highlight key differences in provision.

The policy series covers:

- welfare grants in pregnancy and early childhood
- early years education and childcare
- universal credit and welfare policies

Welfare Grants in Pregnancy and Early Childhood

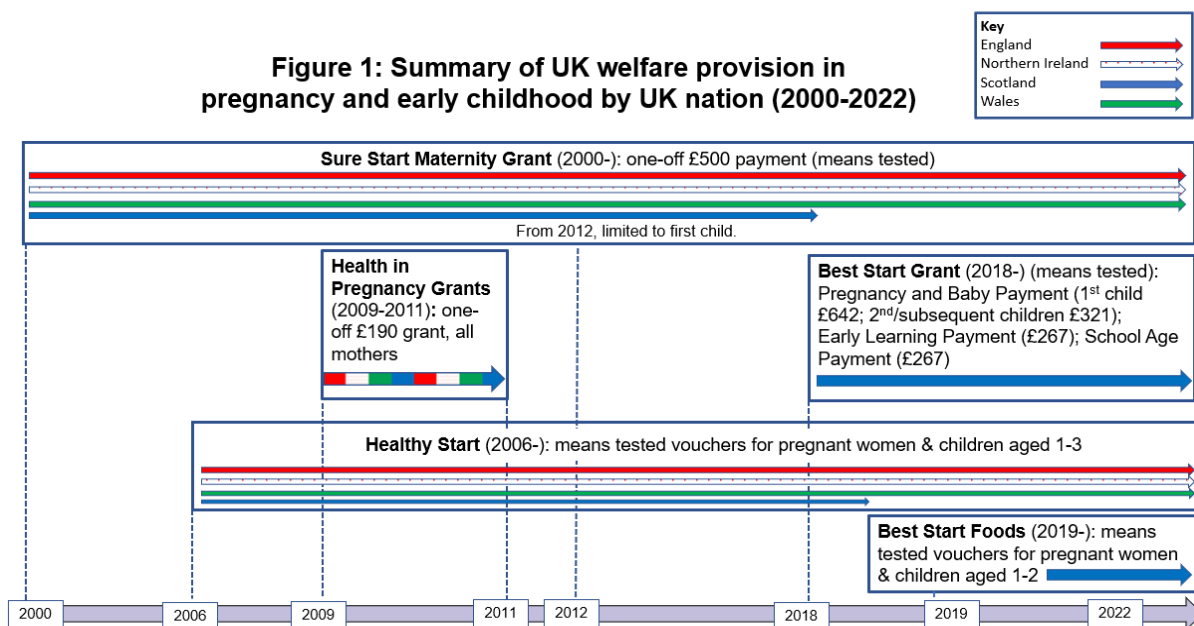
Context

- Poverty is bad for children’s health outcomes[1]. Improving the material circumstances of parents and in particular mothers, is key to improving child and maternal health.
- Existing evidence suggests that welfare grants provided during pregnancy and early childhood are important for child and maternal health outcomes[2-4].
- Increasing household income positively affects children’s social-behavioural development and their health, as well as improving maternal mental health, parenting and the home environment[5], especially for low-income households. Additionally, targeted welfare benefits can lead to a healthier diet[6].

MatCHNet’s policy briefings aim to compare policy variations across the 4 UK nations. In this briefing, the key differences are over time, and between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

UK welfare grants in pregnancy and early childhood

- Welfare grants and vouchers targeting women during pregnancy and young children have existed in the UK for several years. The figure below focuses on provision since 2000. For more information, please see our detailed policy comparisons in *MatCHNet Policy Report 1*.



- The Sure Start Maternity Grant (2000 onwards) is a means tested one-off £500 payment for first time mothers or families expecting a multiple birth (that already have children).
- The universal Health in Pregnancy Grant (2009-2011) was an additional one-off, tax-free payment of £190 provided to help women stay healthy during pregnancy and birth[3].
- In 2018, Scotland replaced the Sure Start Maternity Grant with the Best Start Grant. This includes 3 one-off payments: the Pregnancy and Baby Payment (for first & subsequent children); the Early Learning Payment (for children aged 2-3½ years) and the School Age Payment to help with costs of a child entering school.
- The national Healthy Start scheme (2006) introduced weekly vouchers for fruit, vegetables and milk, with the aim of enabling low-income families on welfare benefits to access healthier foods[6].
- Healthy Start includes vouchers for pregnant women as well as pregnancy and breastfeeding vitamins.
- Scotland replaced Healthy Start (HS) with Best Start Foods in 2019.

What is different across the 4 UK nations?

- The Best Start Grant (Scotland) provides £642 for the first child, which compares to the Sure Start Maternity Grant (£500).
- Pregnancy grants are given to first born children in all UK countries, but to second and subsequent children only in Scotland (£321 per child).
- The Pregnancy and Baby Payment is offered to all women registered for Scotland's Baby Box Scheme.
- The Early Learning Payment (£267) and School Age Payment (£267) are only provided in Scotland.
- In 2019, Best Start Foods (Scotland) initially introduced higher weekly voucher payments, pre-loaded smartcards instead of vouchers, an expanded food range, and universal provision of pregnancy vitamins (vs means tested provision elsewhere). Vitamins are posted in Northern Ireland.
- Pregnant women do not have to wait until they are 10 weeks pregnant to claim Best Start Foods (required to qualify for Healthy Start).

Summary – Key differences are in Scotland

Grants

- *Payment amount:* £142 more for first child and £321 for subsequent births
- *Payment timing:* from 24 weeks vs 29 weeks for SSMG
- *Additional payments:* Early Learning and School Age Payments
- *Conditionality:* health professional signature not required

Food vouchers and vitamins

- Higher weekly payments
- Qualify immediately vs 10 weeks pregnant (HS)
- Provided until 3rd birthday vs 4th birthday (HS)
- Universal pregnancy vitamins



Next steps: there is a need to evaluate differences in policies to determine the impacts on child and maternal health. Evaluations are needed to understand the effectiveness of policies based on **timing and monetary value** of grants, the impact of extending **policy coverage** beyond birth, and assessing the **optimal age** for early years interventions.

More information can be found at:
www.gla.ac.uk/matchnet and on
Twitter @MatCHNet_

Useful links

- UK - [Sure Start Maternity Grant](#); [Healthy Start](#)
- Scotland - [Best Start Grant](#); [Best Start Foods](#)
- Northern Ireland - [Healthy Start](#)

References

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