



# Maternal and Child Health Network Policy Report 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

Each *policy briefing* includes a summary of key policies, a list of differences between the UK nations, and highlights the next steps for evaluating the potential impact of policy variations on child and maternal health outcomes.

Further information is provided in the *detailed policy comparisons* section that includes a detailed timeline diagram, a table summary (including policy details and the policy context) and relevant references.

To compare policies across the 4 UK nations, we have employed and adapted a PICO framework. This is used in *Table one* to identify the P – Population; I – Intervention; C – Comparison; and O – Outcome(s). In addition, we have added T – Time; MatCHNet Intervention Period (pregnancy, infancy, or pre-school); and Policy Context.

### Welfare Grants in Pregnancy and Early Childhood

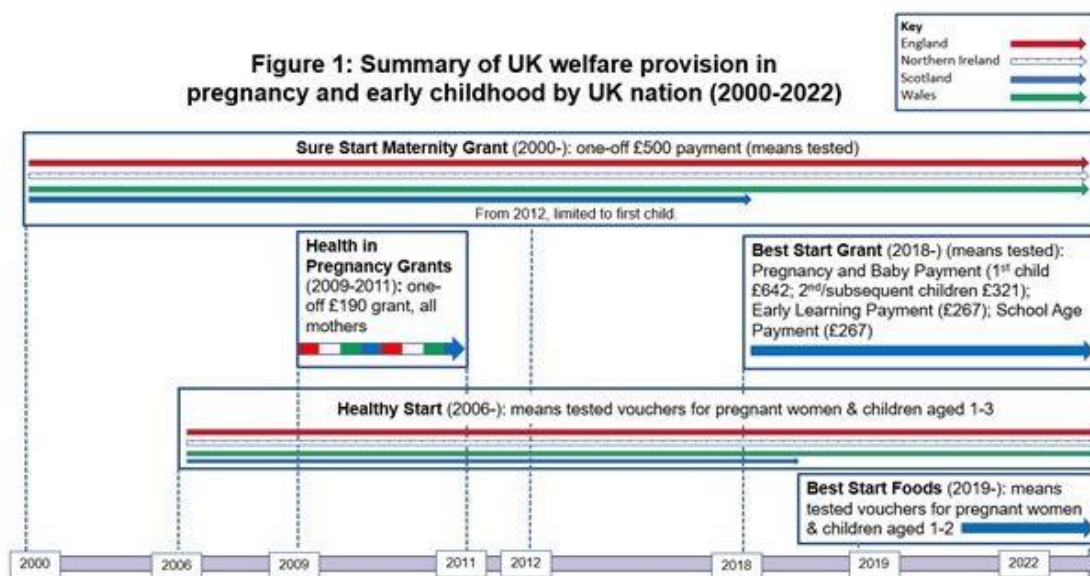
#### Context

- 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 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday vs 4<sup>th</sup> 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](http://www.gla.ac.uk/matchnet) and on  
Twitter @MatCHNet\_

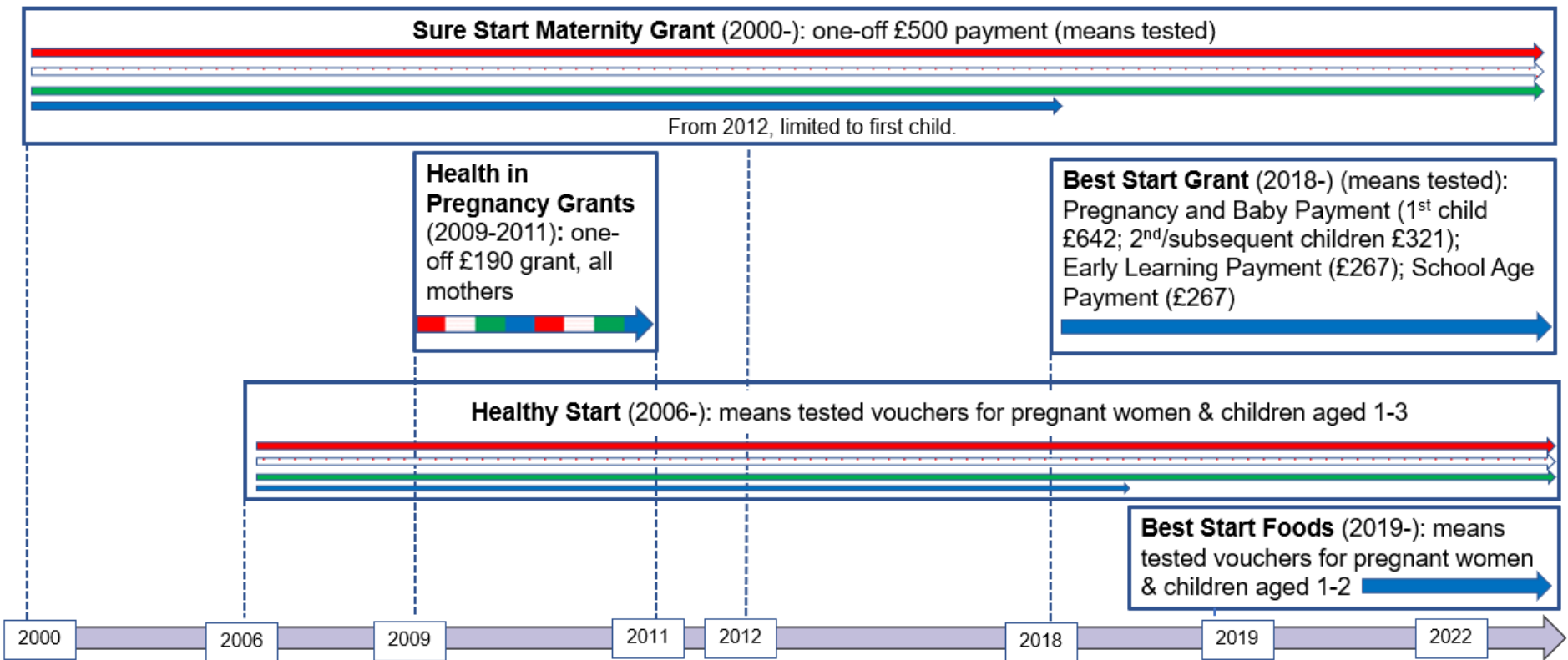
#### Useful links

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

#### References

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**Figure 1: Summary of UK welfare provision in pregnancy and early childhood by UK nation (2000-2022)**



**Table 1: Comparison of welfare grants in pregnancy and early childhood – evidence from the 4 UK nations[1-7]**

	<b>England, Northern Ireland, and Wales</b>	<b>Scotland</b>
<b>Policy</b>	<i>Sure Start Maternity Grant (2000-)</i>	<i>Sure Start Maternity Grant (2000-2018 - As England, NI &amp; Wales)</i> <i>Best Start Grant (2018)</i>
<b>Population</b>	Low-income pregnant women	Low-income pregnant women and families
<b>Intervention</b>	<p>One-off welfare payment of £500 to help with costs of having a child (means tested).</p> <p>Eligibility: first time mothers or women expecting a multiple birth that already have children.</p> <p>Claimed from 29 weeks until 6 months after birth (previously 3 months). Form must be countersigned by health professional to confirm health advice given.</p>	<p>Replaces Sure Start Maternity Grant and includes 3 payments<sup>1</sup> (all means tested):</p> <p>1. <i>Pregnancy and Baby Payment (PBP)</i>: Payment of £642.35 for first child and £321.20 for each subsequent child, with no limit on the number of children that can be claimed for.</p> <p>Claimed from 24 weeks until 6 months after birth. Form does not need to be signed by a health professional if claimant has registered for a baby box<sup>2</sup> (offered to all pregnant women between 20–24 weeks).</p> <p>2. <i>Early Learning Payment (ELP)</i>: Payment of £267.65 to the parent or carer of a child who is between 2 and 3½ years old. No UK equivalent.</p> <p>3. <i>School Age Payment (SAP)</i>: Payment of £267.65 to help with costs of a child entering school. No UK equivalent.</p>
<b>Comparator</b>	<p>All other pregnant mothers (especially second time mothers).</p> <p>Compare outcomes before/after policy.</p> <p>Compare with Pregnancy and Baby Payment in Scotland.</p>	<p>Compare with Sure Start Maternity Grant recipients in other UK nations. Also compare outcomes in Scotland before/after Best Start Grant (3 grant payments).</p> <p>ELP and SAP (no UK equivalents): compare differences in health outcomes with other UK nations.</p>

<sup>1</sup> The [3 Best Start Grants amounts have changed over time](#): *Pregnancy and Baby Payment* (first child payment - £600 from 2018-2021; £603 in 2021 and £642.35 from 2022 and subsequent children payment - £300 from 2018-2021; £303 in 2021 and £321.20 from 2022); *Early Learning Payment* (£250 from 2019-20; £252.50 in 2021 and £267.65 from 2022); *School Age Payment* (£250 in 2020; £252.50 in 2021 and £267.65 from 2022). The *Sure Start Maternity Grant* remains unchanged at £500 (since 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Scotland is the only UK nation to currently offer a national [Baby Box](#) scheme. The Welsh Government has piloted a [Baby Bundles](#) scheme.



		Compare attainment gap between deprived vs other children at school entry.
<b>Time</b>	Introduced in 2000 (£300) and increased to £500 in 2002. From 2012, limited to first child. From 2018, claims can be made up to 6 months (previously 3 months).	Sure Start Maternity Grant – 2000-2018 Pregnancy and Baby Payment – 2018 Early Learning Payment – 2019 School Age Payment - 2020
<b>Health Outcomes:</b>	Birth outcomes, Child physical/cognitive development, Child chronic diseases (e.g., obesity), Child mental health, Maternal mental health	
<b>MatCHNet Intervention Period</b>	Pregnancy	Pregnancy, Infancy, Pre-school

<b>Policy Context</b>	<b>UK:</b> Healthy Child Programme (2009), Family Nurse Family Partnership (2013); First 1000 Days of Life (2019); The Best Start for Life (2021)			
	<b>England</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Wales</b>
	Every Child Matters (2003) Children’s Public Health Transfer (2015) (transfer from NHS to LAs) Health Matters (2016) Better Births/Maternity Transformation Programme (2016)	Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge (2006) Healthy Child, Healthy Future (2010) A Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland 2012 – 2018	Getting it Right for Every Child (2006)  The Best Start: A Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care (2017)	Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (2013) Early Years Outcomes Framework (2015) A Strategic Vision for Maternity Services in Wales (2011) Maternity Services Strategy (2019-2024)

	<b>England, Northern Ireland, and Wales</b>	<b>Scotland</b>
<b>Policy</b>	<i>Healthy Start (2006)</i>	<i>Healthy Start (2006-2019 - As England, NI &amp; Wales)</i> <i>Best Start Foods (2019)</i>
<b>Population</b>	All pregnant women (from 10 weeks) under 18 years.  Low-income pregnant women (from 10 weeks) and children under age 4 (payment stops at 4 <sup>th</sup> birthday).	All pregnant women under 18 years.  Low-income pregnant women mothers (any gestation) and children under age 3 (payment stops at 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday).  All pregnant mothers (Healthy Start Vitamins only).
<b>Intervention</b>	Weekly vouchers for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pregnant women (£4.25pw)</li> <li>• children under 1 (£8.50pw)</li> <li>• children aged 1-3 (£4.25pw)</li> </ul> <p>Vouchers (pre-paid card) can be used to buy milk, fresh, frozen, and tinned fruit and vegetables, fresh, dried, and tinned pulses, and infant formula milk (means tested).</p> <p>Coupons provided for pregnancy vitamins, breastfeeding vitamins, and vitamins for children until 4<sup>th</sup> birthday.</p> <p>In Northern Ireland, vitamins are posted (not available through pharmacies)[7].</p>	Best Start Foods replaces Healthy Start. Weekly payments <sup>3</sup> for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pregnant women (£4.50pw)</li> <li>• children under 1 (£9.00pw)</li> <li>• children aged 1-2 (£4.50pw)</li> </ul> <p>Vouchers replaced with pre-loaded smartcard that can be used in shops and online (means tested).</p> <p>Food range initially expanded to include eggs, fruit, vegetables, pulses, and milk. As of 2021, only difference with Healthy Start is the inclusion of eggs.</p> <p>Universal provision of Healthy Start vitamins to all pregnant women.</p> <p>Vitamins provided to eligible children until 4<sup>th</sup> birthday (means tested - varies by local health authority).</p>
<b>Comparator</b>	All other pregnant mothers.  Compare outcomes before/after policy.  Compare with Best Start Foods in Scotland.	Compare with Healthy Start recipients in other UK nations. Also compare outcomes in Scotland before/after Best Start Foods.  Compare attainment gap between deprived vs other children at school entry.

<sup>3</sup> Initial weekly Best Start Food payments were slightly higher than UK Healthy Start but limited up to age 3 (i.e., pregnant women - £4.25 vs £3.10; children under age 1 £8.50 vs £6.20; children aged 1-2 - £4.25 vs £3.10).

<b>Time</b>	From 2006, payment stops at 5 <sup>th</sup> birthday. From 2008, payment stops at 4 <sup>th</sup> birthday. From 2021, weekly payments increased (as above). From 2022, paper vouchers replaced with pre-paid card.	Healthy Start 2006-2019 Best Start Foods - 2019
<b>Health Outcomes:</b> Birth outcomes, Child chronic diseases (e.g., obesity), Child physical/cognitive development, Maternal mental health		
<b>MatCHNet Intervention Period:</b> Pregnancy, Infancy, Pre-school		

<b>Policy Context</b>	<b>UK:</b> UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative (1994; 2012)			
	<b>England</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Wales</b>
	Health Matters (2016) Childhood Obesity: a plan for action (2016, 2018)	Healthy Child, Healthy Future (2010) A Fitter Future for All (2012-2022) Breastfeeding - A Great Start - A Strategy for Northern Ireland (2013-23)	Healthy Eating, Active Living (2008-2011) Preventing Overweight and Obesity in Scotland: A Route Map Towards Healthy Weight (2010) Improving Maternal and Infant Nutrition: A Framework for Action (2011) Obesity Route Map - Action Plan (2011)	Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (2013) Early Years Outcomes Framework (2015) (incl. breastfeeding targets) Breastfeeding Plan (2019-2024) Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales (2019) Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales obesity strategy (2021)

## References

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*Disclaimer.* Please be aware that policies in the area of child and maternal health can change frequently. Our policy reports and briefings are dated and have a version number. It may be advisable to also search for more recent material on this topic.



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