



# Healthy Start Consultation

August 2019

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## Executive summary

This report presents the views of a small sample of parents, health professionals and early year's professionals living and working in the London Borough of Bexley (LBB). The 8 week consultation period took place from 15th July until 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2019.

Healthwatch Bexley (Healthwatch) listened to over **250** people's comments on the Healthy Start voucher scheme. We visited **19** groups and locations throughout the London Borough of Bexley. Visits included parent and child groups, baby clinics, children's centres, hospitals, and events such as community fun days. We listened to **145** parents by talking face to face to them whilst completing the Healthy Start questionnaire and held **three** different interviews and focus groups.

Healthwatch would like to thank all the residents and professionals who took part in our research and took the time to talk to us. We would also like to thank all the hospitals, children's centres, nurseries and baby clinics that kindly let us visit. A full list of our visits can be found in Appendix 1.

### Key issues

- Lack of knowledge for parents around the Healthy Start voucher scheme. Many parents we spoke to had not heard of the scheme.
- The scheme is not consistently publicised and advertised sufficiently at key venues such as baby clinics, nurseries, children's centres and food banks.
- Some health and early year's professionals were not fully aware of the qualifying criteria to be eligible for the scheme or actively promoting the scheme.
- Application forms are not being signed in a timely basis by health professionals.
- The turnaround time of application forms once signed is slow, with some people not getting a response after applying.

### Recommendations

1. There needs to be a continued local marketing campaign by LBB to ensure the profile and importance of Healthy Start is maximised across all stakeholders in Bexley. The Healthy Start re-launch event on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019 is a good starting place for this, however, it would be beneficial for health professionals to have more regular, smaller, events to discuss the uptake of Healthy Start and increase awareness of the scheme amongst professionals. Healthy Start could continue to be promoted in the Bexley magazine which is delivered to all households in the borough.

2. Information on what is available via Healthy Start and how to apply must be clearer for parents and introduced at an early stage, in a way that helps most parents feel confident and encouraged to apply. Repeat reminders are required for parents to apply or recheck eligibility. Healthy Start information is passed on to pregnant mothers but they may not apply straight away, perhaps they are coping with pregnancy and forget. Health visitors can capture any eligible mothers once their baby has been born and they are attending baby clinics. Nursery staff can promote the scheme as a child starts nursery and GP's could promote the scheme to parents of young children when they attend an appointment. If all health professionals promote the scheme consistently there is less chance of parents not being informed or missing out.
3. All those involved in supporting parents such as midwives, health visitors, nurseries, child minders and even GP's, could receive regular informal updates and reminders from LBB to promote Healthy Start and advise parents how to take advantage of the benefits. These updates could be two way and provide valuable information on how the scheme is being received and identify any problems that may arise.
4. Vitamins need to be made more accessible across the borough to those eligible. More places could be made available for parents to collect the vitamins from using their vouchers such as GP practices. Local chemists could be included which may also encourage people with minor illnesses to seek advice there rather than making a doctor's appointment.
5. Midwives, health visitors and other health professionals should continue to inform parents of the importance of using Healthy Start vitamins and where to get them from, to help increase uptake and the use of vitamins and vouchers.

## Introduction

Healthwatch were pleased to be asked by the London Borough of Bexley (LBB) to explore the uptake of the Healthy Start scheme across the borough.

The research involved talking to parents about their knowledge of the scheme and their experiences of applying for and redeeming Healthy Start vouchers. Healthwatch were also asked to engage with midwives, health visitors and early years professionals, to ascertain their understanding of the scheme and how they promoted it.

Healthy Start is a UK-wide statutory scheme providing a nutritional safety net to pregnant women and children under four in low-income families in receipt of certain benefits or tax credits. This important means-tested scheme provides vouchers which can be used at supermarkets and local shops to buy milk and fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables. Vouchers that can be exchanged for free Healthy Start vitamins are also provided for pregnant women, breastfeeding women and children aged from six months to four years. Women's vitamin tablets contain folic acid, vitamin C and D and children's vitamin drops contain vitamins A, C and D. (Healthy Start, 2019).

Women who are at least ten weeks pregnant, or those who have a child under four years old, could be entitled to Healthy Start vouchers to help buy basic foods. This is dependent on criteria such as income support or universal tax credits. Pregnant women or those with children over one and under four years old can get one, £3.10 voucher per week. For each child under one year old, families can get two £3.10 vouchers (£6.20) per week. Lastly, pregnant women under 18 automatically qualify even if they are not entitled to the criteria mentioned above. (Healthy Start, 2019).

Bexley families who are eligible can now collect Healthy Start vitamins from local health visitors and from Queen Mary's Hospital Midwifery Service.

Until now Healthy Start vitamins have not been available in Bexley, but the Council's Public Health team has been working with Bexley's Health Visiting service and Queen Mary's to make these available. (LBB, 2019)

Dr Anjan Ghosh, Bexley's Director of Public Health said, *"Vitamins are essential nutrients for our body and are needed more so during pregnancy and early childhood to support healthy growth and*

*development. We want to make sure that our residents not only know what they're entitled to, but also make sure these schemes are accessible throughout the borough.” (LBB, 2019)*

Councillor Alex Sawyer, Cabinet Member for Communities said *“This is one step in the right direction for our wider ongoing commitment to supporting families to maintain a healthy lifestyle. We will be continuing to work with partners to keep spreading the message and to make sure more of our residents take advantage of this currently underused Government scheme.” (LBB, 2019)*

The key areas our research covered were:

- Awareness of the scheme
- Accessibility of the vouchers
- Usage of the vouchers
- Barriers in accessing the vouchers
- Promotion of the scheme including literature, posters and advertising

## Vision

The Healthy Start scheme provides vouchers for eligible families to purchase fruit, vegetables and milk to help kick start healthy eating habits. Currently in Bexley £150,000 a year is not claimed under the scheme, which means money not being used to support our most vulnerable families and not going into the local economy. The shared vision is to see that money fully utilised by those that need the support. (LBB Bexley Magazine Autumn 2019, 2019)

The aim for the LBB is to boost the uptake of the scheme and increase the profile and awareness of Healthy Start to ensure the eligible recipients are able to take advantage of this valuable initiative. Healthwatch would like to see knowledge increased amongst midwives' health visitors, nurseries and GP's to ensure all feel equipped to promote and advise on the schemes benefits and how these can be easily accessed by those who need them. (LBB Bexley Magazine Autumn, 2019)

Ultimately, the vision is for Bexley to be seen as leading in supporting parents to adopt healthy eating as part of their daily lives and to educate their families. This can be seen in the LBB Obesity Strategy where the vision is to support everyone to have a healthy weight to halt the rise in excess weight amongst children and for children to have the best start in life. (LBB Obesity Strategy, 2019)

## Methodology

The Healthwatch consultation period ran from 15<sup>th</sup> July 2019 to 9<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

Healthwatch worked with the LBB Public Health team to produce a series of qualitative and quantitative questions. Qualitative methods were used alongside quantitative methods to capture people's views, as this method is more exploratory in nature and allows participants to provide rich in-depth answers in their own words (NHS England 2017, 2019)

Healthwatch invited people to comment on the Healthy Start voucher scheme in one of the following ways:

- A questionnaire for parents
- Face to face at focus groups throughout the borough
- 3 people were invited to be case studies

Healthwatch visited baby clinics, children's centres, playgroups, nurseries, hospitals and community events with the aim of engaging with parents and health professionals. Completing the questionnaire was anonymous and optional, with most people happy to engage with us.

Unfortunately, our research period coincided with school holidays and this impacted on the number of people we were able to engage with due to annual leave, children's centre programme changes and nursery closures. Healthwatch did not engage with local childminders but recognise their opinions would be important in any future work. A full list of all groups we engaged with can be found in Appendix 2.

Healthwatch prepared a shopping basket showing what could be purchased for £3.10 from Lidl. The basket consisted of a bag of frozen mixed vegetables, a pint of milk, a bag of new potatoes, bananas and a bag of apples. The basket was put on display at the children's centre visits so parents could visually see how much food could be purchased with a £3.10 voucher.

Focus groups for health visitors were held at two health centres where the Healthy Start voucher scheme was discussed. Members of the groups were told taking part was optional and given the option to decline. No one declined to take part in the discussion.

Respondents who were not eligible for the scheme were not required to complete the full questionnaire. The majority of questions invited respondents to comment and expand on their answers which resulted in many similar comments with only a selection included in this report.

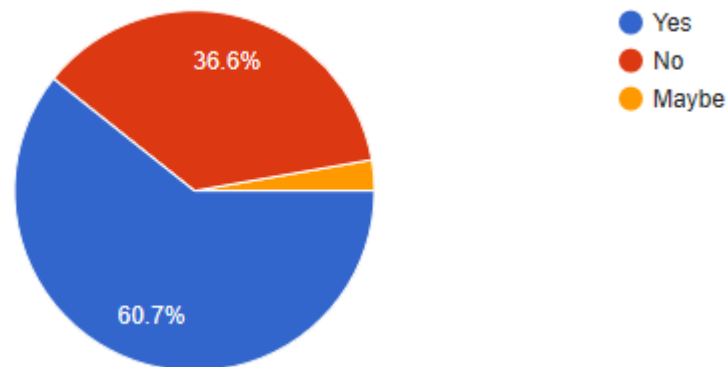
Comments were selected based on their originality or as a representation of a commonly occurring theme, the most relevant and significant of which are shown to illustrate the statements made within the questionnaire.

Data captured from questionnaires was inputted in August/September. This data and the findings from the focus groups, were collated and used to write this report in September by a member of the Healthwatch Bexley team.



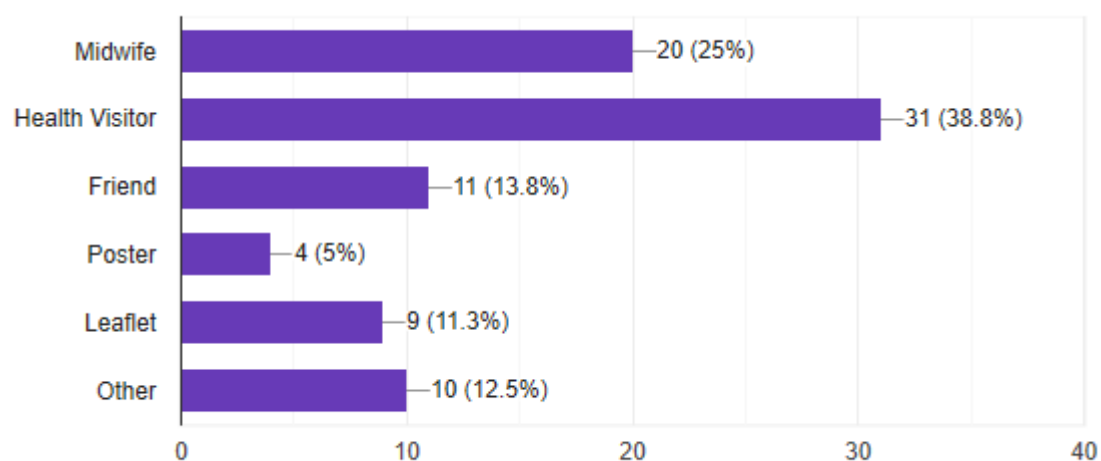
## Breakdown of responses

### 1. Have you heard of the Healthy Start vouchers? (n145)



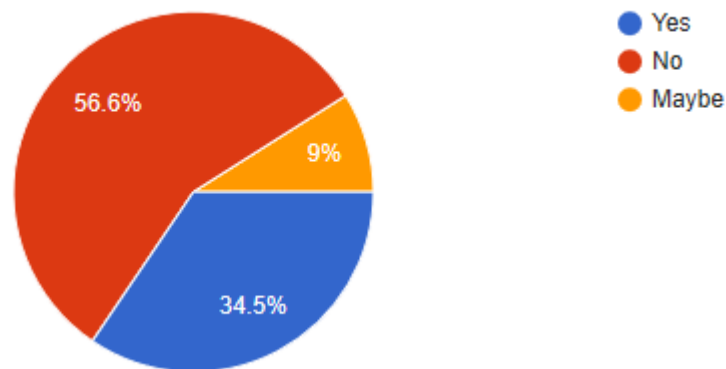
36% of those who we listened too had not heard of the Healthy Start Vouchers. On talking to parents, an increased number in the north of the borough are aware of the scheme compared with the south.

### 2. If Yes, how did you hear about the vouchers? (n145)



38.8% of respondents had heard of the vouchers through the health visitor with 25% hearing about the vouchers from their midwife. Only 5% and 11% respectively, had heard of the vouchers through posters and leaflets. 13.8% had heard of the scheme through friends.

### 3. Are you eligible to claim for the vouchers? (n145)



56% of residents we engaged with were not eligible to claim vouchers with 9% being unsure if they could claim them. The most common reason for not being eligible to claim vouchers was because families had an income of over £16,190 per year (Child Tax Credit) or £408 a month (Universal Credit). Reasons for not meeting the criteria can be seen in responses to question 4 below and include children being too old to qualify or not being aware of the scheme.

### 4. If no why not?

*"Income too high."*

*"Do not meet criteria."*

*"We both work."*

*"Not eligible."*

*"Children now too old to qualify."*

*"I do not claim any of the required benefits."*

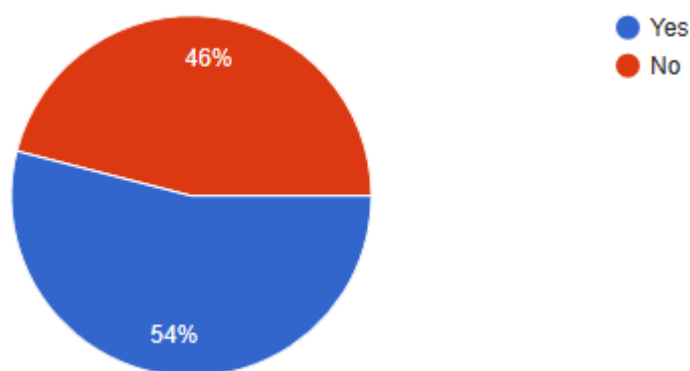
*"I have applied for universal credit and am waiting for the outcome."*

*"I am six months pregnant and have not been told anything about the scheme."*

*"I was receiving them for my son but then stopped getting them when my universal credit changed. My new universal credit starts on 7th September so she will check again if I am eligible."*

*"I do not meet criteria. I also have a 3 year old but did not know about the scheme even when I had her three years ago."*

**5. If yes, and you are eligible, do you claim the vouchers? (n50)**



Of those eligible to claim the vouchers 46% did not claim them and 54% were claiming the vouchers. Reasons given for not claiming vouchers are given below in question 6.

**6. If not why not? (n23)**

Of those respondents not claiming the vouchers, the majority told us that they either did not know of the scheme or had problems with the application process such as applying and not getting a response after sending off their completed forms or difficulties in getting completed forms signed by health professionals.

*"I did not realise I was eligible as gave birth at 15. I now have an application form and will apply."*

*"Filled out application form but had trouble getting it signed by GP and just gave up. Child will be 4 in September."*

*"I have a 4 & 3-year-old and have never claimed Healthy Start before. Nobody advised me to. After speaking to Healthwatch I will now send off my claim form."*

*"I did use to get the vouchers. They stopped so I have reapplied but am yet to hear."*

*"Reapplied nearly a year ago but heard nothing. I have tried phoning and e-mailing but had no luck."*

*"I applied about a month ago and am still waiting for vouchers to come through."*

*"They are sent to me but I forget to use them."*

*"Wasn't aware they existed. Have now got an application form."*

*"I did an application form and sent it off. I was contacted to say that the form was not signed by me and the health visitor. It was so I did another form which I got signed again, sent that off a few months ago and have not heard back."*

*"I use to claim with my first two children, but haven't for my third. She is now 1. I will apply."*

*"Baby is only 3 weeks old and not yet aware of these. Not been told at hospital or by midwives etc. Will now look into claiming."*

*"Unaware of the scheme, will now apply (baby is 7 months old)."*

*"Not at the moment. Have taken a form and will get it signed by health visitor to start claiming. Daughter is 2."*

*"Baby is five weeks old. Need to get health visitor to sign form and will post it off."*

*"Not signed letter yet."*

*"I claimed them with my 4 other children. I didn't think I was eligible for my 5th child. Universal Credit wasn't on the list when I was pregnant and I haven't been advised of this new addition to the criteria."*

*"I was unaware of this scheme. I claim child tax credit and will complete the form."*

*"I have recently submitted a claim. I will now follow this up as vouchers haven't been sent through to me."*

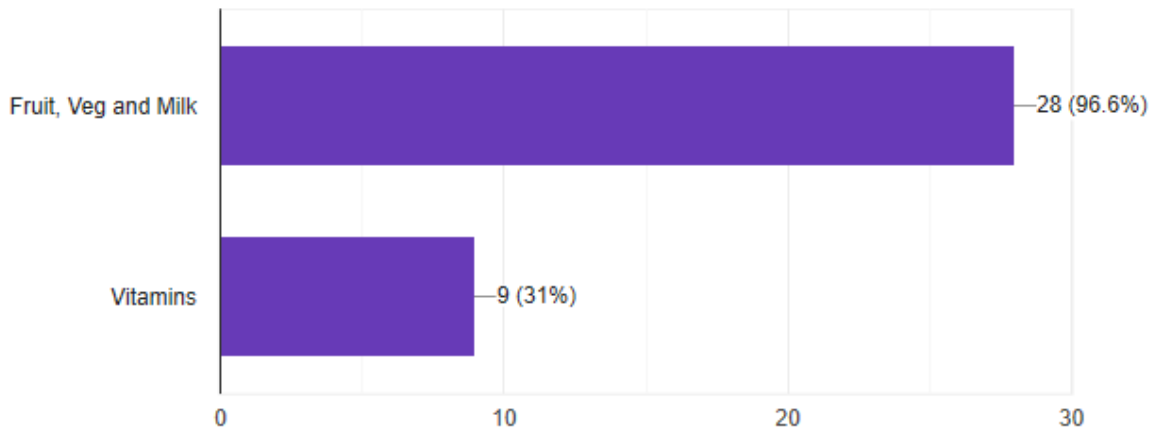
*"I sent off my application form 3 weeks ago but have not heard anything. After talking to Healthwatch I will chase it up."*

*"Have just sent my application from off and am waiting for them to come through."*

*"I claimed them for my first 3 children but am not claiming currently for my 4th child. I have just never got around to it."*

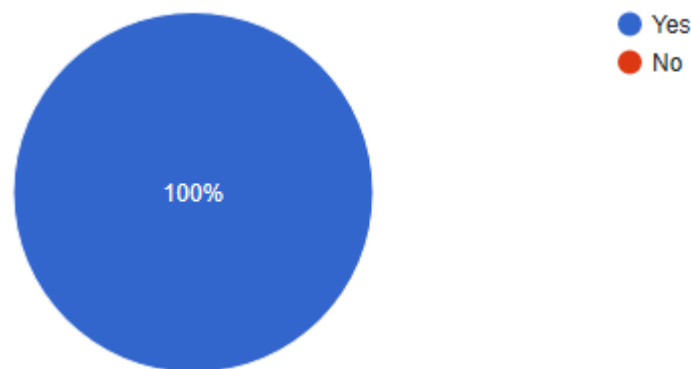
*"Didn't really know how to apply, I've recently move to Bexley and my child is 3. I now have an application form and will complete it."*

#### **7. I use the Healthy Start vouchers for: (n29)**



96.6% of respondents get vouchers and use them to buy fruit, veg and milk but only 31% claim the free vitamins. The reasons for not claiming the free vitamins are discussed in question 16.

**8. Do you find the vouchers useful/worthwhile? (n29)**



100% of respondents found the vouchers useful telling us it helped them to buy fresh fruit and veg that they would not normally buy as they found it too expensive. Some mothers told us it helped to buy milk such as soya which they had to use because of children's allergies. It must be noted that as 96.6% of respondents used the vouchers for fruit, veg and milk and only 31% for vitamins, the majority of comments relate to fruit veg and milk vouchers not the vitamin vouchers.

**9. Please explain more about how useful the vouchers are? (n14)**

*"Really helpful when money is running short."*

*"They really make a difference."*

*"It really helps towards baby milk which is very expensive."*

*"I always use them."*

*"I have 5 children and this really helps towards their fruit and veg intake."*

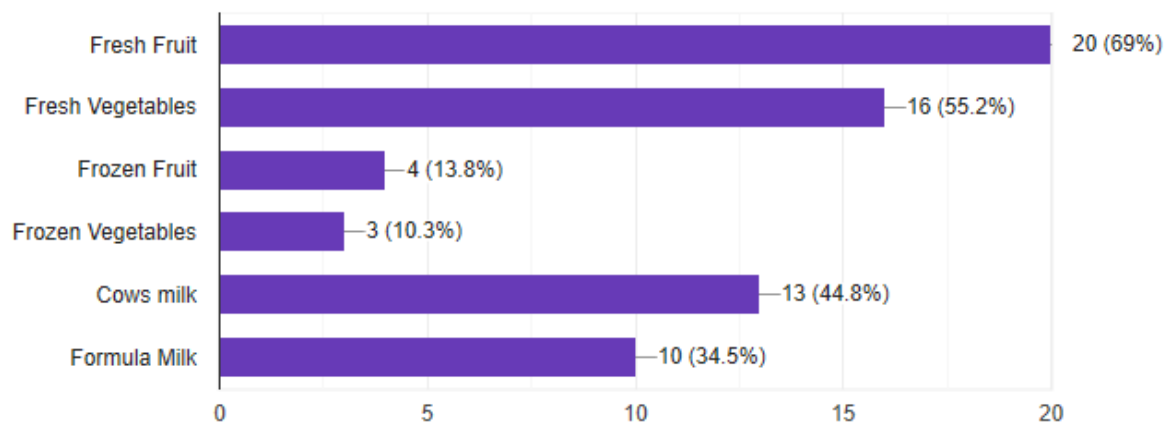
*"I forget to use them."*

*"Really helps with having 3 kids."*

*"My baby is on soya baby milk which is very expensive so these vouchers help towards the milk."*

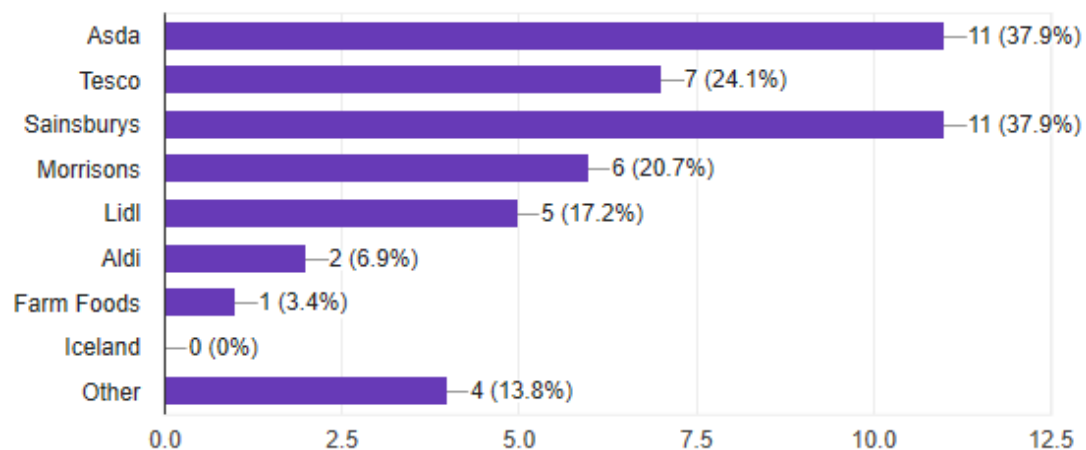
## Healthy Start fruit, veg and milk vouchers

### 10. What do you buy with your vouchers? (n29)



Above can be seen a breakdown of what respondents buy with the vouchers. 69% and 55.2% use vouchers to buy fresh fruit and veg respectively, whilst 44.8% and 34.5% use vouchers to buy cow's milk or formula milk respectively.

### 11. Which shop/shops do you use the vouchers in? (n29)



37.9% of the parents we listened to redeemed their vouchers at Asda or Sainsburys, followed by Tesco 24.1% and Morrisons 20.7%.

### 12. Why do you shop in these stores? (n13)

Reasons for the shop choice included value for money, accessible location and it being easy to use redeem the vouchers.

*"Prefer to use local shops. No point in carrying shopping back on the bus from ASDA."*

*"Value for money."*

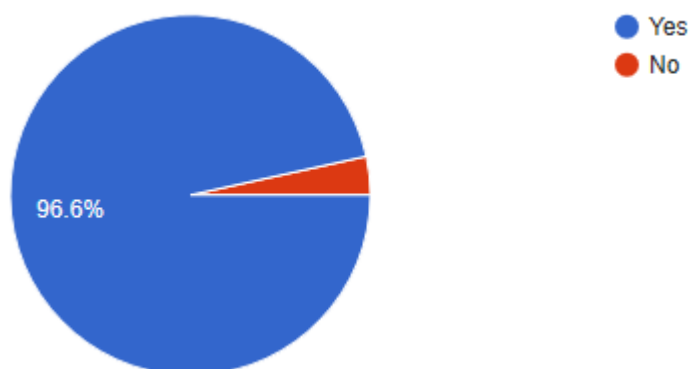
*"Easily accessible."*

*"They always accept the vouchers without question."*

*"Nearest to home."*

*"Convenience."*

**13. Is it easy to use the vouchers? (n29)**



The majority 96.6% found it easy to redeem vouchers in local shops. Although some people told us using multiple vouchers was not always easy and some cashiers/workers were not aware of the vouchers.

**14. Is it easy to use the vouchers- comments (n14)**

*"Never been queried at the supermarket."*

*"Easy to use them, although sometimes I am only able to redeem 2 vouchers at a time."*

*"They are accepted without question."*

*"In Sainsburys and Morrisons it is easy to use them. In Asda they always query them."*



*"I have difficulty redeeming them against cow's milk - the cashiers regularly query this. Self-service tills make it more difficult to use the voucher. They do not seem to recognise them."*

*"If I use self-service I can be held up waiting for a member of staff to help me."*

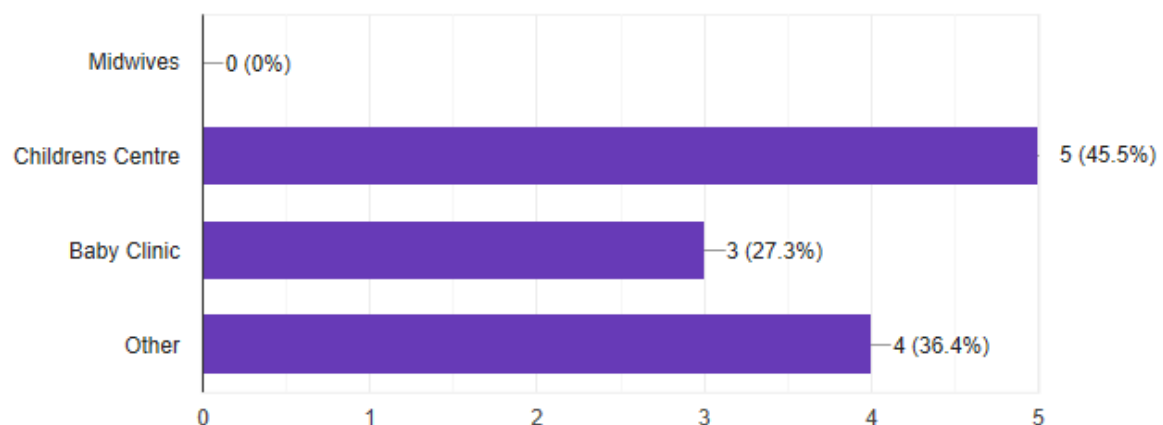
*"On odd occasions the checkout staff query or reject them, I have to get a supervisor to help."*

*"Sometimes there is confusion when using more than one voucher, the supervisor has to be called."*

*"Sometime there are problems. Not all staff are aware of the vouchers."*

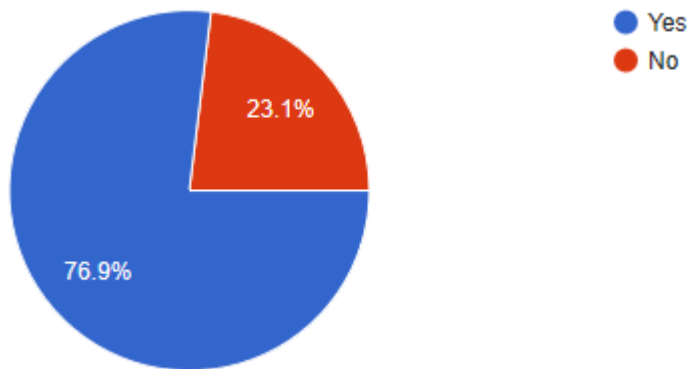
## Healthy Start vitamin vouchers

### 15. Where do you get the healthy start vitamins from? (n11)



45.5% get vitamins from their local children's centre, 27.3% from the baby clinic and 36.4% get vitamins from other sources such as the chemist.

**16. Is it easy to get the vitamins? (n13)**



76.9% of respondents told us they found it easy to get the free vitamins and 23.1% said it was not easy. Reasons can be found in question 17.

**17. Is it easy to get the vitamins -comments (n19)**

The majority of respondents who did not find it easy to use the free vitamin vouchers told us they were unsure where to get the vitamins from. Some did not believe they had received any vouchers for vitamins or said it was not always convenient to visit the children's centre/baby clinics.

*"Not currently claiming the vitamins."*

*"Always redeemed without any problems."*

*"I don't claim the vitamins, not sure where to get them from. Sometimes the vitamin vouchers get sent through with the food vouchers. Other times they are not sent with the food vouchers."*

*"I get the vitamin vouchers but cannot be bothered to use them."*

*"I get the vouchers but do not use them because I forget to take them to the baby clinic when I go. When I do remember to take them, it is easy to use them."*

*"I have never received the vitamin vouchers."*

*"The vitamin vouchers I receive have VOID written across them. I get the healthy start vouchers and use them."*

*"I don't use the vouchers, not sure where to go to get vitamins."*

*"I don't get the vitamins at the moment as not sure where to go. I have loads of unused vouchers."*

*"I do not claim the vouchers as I do not know where to get them from. Have tried the chemist but they do not accept the vouchers."*

### Health Visitor Focus group findings

On 22 August and 4th September 2019 Healthwatch held two informal focus groups with health visitors. Each group consisted of 12 health visitors. Healthwatch provided some background about the research being undertaken and explained that we would like to gain the views of health professionals.

When asked if all were aware of the Healthy Start voucher scheme all confirmed that they were however, some had not seen anything about the re-launch event on September 20th and commented that now their diaries are probably so booked they would not be able to attend.

They were asked if they had received any training about healthy start and how to promote it effectively. They confirmed they had not. They were also asked if they had a supply of literature relating to Healthy Start. The majority had access to the application booklets but leaflets and posters were scarce. They also stated that they are not aware of where to get posters and leaflets from and would appreciate details of how to get promotional materials for their clinics.

When asked how many Healthy Start application forms they sign per month, the response was not many and some months, it could be just one or two so not high volume. When signing the form, the health visitor is asked to use the surgery stamp although sometimes, this is not always possible so they write on the address of the surgery. They are also asked to provide their GMC or NMC pin number however, this is optional. One health visitor said that she provides her phone number on an application form and that she has received calls from Healthy Start to verify who she is.

Health visitors told us many parents are applying for the vouchers through the Healthy Start application form (in some cases, several times) but are unable to get a response from Healthy Start. They then assume they are not eligible so do not follow up the application therefore, clarity is

needed on the correct process and contact numbers. One Health Visitor contacted the number on the application form and was told it is a two week turn-around from the application being received to a letter being sent out to the claimant and that all those applying would get a response within two weeks.

All applicants eventually get a letter whether they are eligible or not. If they do not get a response it is because the application has not been received. Again, clarity on the correct process is required. Another health visitor asked why parents need to apply when pregnant but also, have to reapply after birth? This should be made easier for them and just continue seamlessly as it is not at the top of a new parent's agenda to reapply when adapting to life with a new baby or second child. Also, another queried why is it necessary for parents to have to re-apply for the scheme once their child is over the age of one?

Barriers with getting the form signed were discussed. Not all mothers visit the health visitor regularly for various reasons. They may have older children and it can be difficult to access the clinic etc. or health visitors may not be available on the day a mother is at the clinic. Nursery nurses can weigh children and provide advice but are not authorized to sign the application form. Therefore, a mother may have to make a return visit to get her form signed. The question was asked why nursery nurses could not sign the form. The health visitors responded that it was because nursery nurses do not have a GMC or NMC pin number, however this is optional on the application form. The comment was also made that the people who are eligible for the vouchers are probably not going to spend two lots of money on bus fare trying to get a form signed.

It was felt that it could be more straight forward to get the application form signed off. The health visitors felt that the reason they had to sign the form was to prove that the mother is being supported and being offered health advice. However, if there was a way that the form could be processed by using the child's birth certificate and parents national insurance number this may make the process easier for parents to claim the vouchers. Some of the health visitors commented that the speed application forms are processed at can be very slow. A number said that they had received feedback where parents had been waiting several weeks for a response.

Health visitors agreed that information about the scheme should be put in all new baby (bounty) packs and ante-natal packs and that the council needs to consider how those parents in temporary accommodation or with no access to public funds are supported otherwise they will miss out.

It was pointed out that the bounty pack has vitamin D drops included in it. The drops will last for a duration of 30 days but many mothers do not continue with the vitamins afterwards as they don't know how or where to claim them from. Again, clear advice needs to be provided to pregnant mothers on how to apply for the vitamins and where they should get them from.

The health visitors who spoke to us had not experienced and did not believe stigma to be a barrier for parents claiming Healthy Start vouchers. In fact they felt parents who met the criteria were grateful for any help they could get.

It was felt by some health visitors that vitamins should be made available to all families in the borough not just those on low incomes. One health visitor explained how a mother had moved from Bromley (where all families get free vitamins) to Bexley and was surprised she had to apply via the Healthy Start scheme or buy them from a pharmacist or supermarket.

Another health visitor commented, *"It is frustrating when you see a mother and child who would really benefit from vitamins but they have not registered with Healthy Start or perhaps may not be eligible. Even though the clinic may have a stock of vitamins, they are unable to give them out without a voucher and if the person cannot be bothered to claim the vouchers or is not eligible, there is nothing that can be done."*

Healthwatch asked what the procedure was if someone presents a Healthy Start vitamins voucher in the clinic. The health visitors responded that the vitamins are handed over and the voucher is then logged on a central system detailing who they were given to and when. It was commented at the meeting that for the children's vitamins the expiry dates were very short and sometimes, the supply in the clinic was not being utilised before the vitamins expired. The vitamins for mothers have a much longer expiry date.

Healthwatch asked if it was possible to get a Bounty pack which is given to new mothers when they become pregnant. We were told a midwife could provide this and that they were not always given out. Some mothers get a voucher where they would have to collect a free pack from a local chemist. Another comment was made by a pregnant health visitor who said that she had recently received a bounty pack and there was no leaflet about Healthy Start included. There were vitamins and some literature about vitamins but nothing about the fruit, vegetables and milk vouchers.

Health visitors felt one big challenge is that midwife visits are short (10 minutes). This does not really allow time for a midwife to spend time talking to a new mother who may be eligible for the scheme. Also, mothers, who do not come to the clinics, miss out on getting information about vouchers and vitamins and won't always come in just to get vitamins, particularly if it is too far or they don't drive. They should be able to get them from more places such as GP surgeries as mothers will be more likely to go there to collect. Most only come to the clinic if they want their baby weighed.

When asked how the scheme is promoted some health visitors were unsure if it was promoted at the "booking in" appointment by a midwife when you first register that you are pregnant. Information should be provided by the midwives at this stage as this is when you are able to start claiming the vouchers and vitamins if you are eligible. By the time mothers get to see a health visitor they have had their baby and unless a mother enquires or it is obvious someone is on a low income it would not necessarily be promoted.

Although £3.10 is not much it is still important for mothers with low incomes so could details be sent out with other benefit applications? One health visitor told us that in some cases the vouchers could be abused in some shops and used to buy cigarettes and alcohol, however from the research Healthwatch conducted we found no evidence of this.

## Foodbank Findings

Healthwatch visited four foodbanks across the borough on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> August. Healthwatch assumed the foodbanks would be busy during the school holidays due to children not getting their free school meals etc. However, the volunteers at each food bank said that the number of families attending during the holidays was down by about 50% compared to the number that usually visit during school term time. One volunteer commented that he believed families avoid the food banks during this time as they don't want their children to know that they have been getting food from there. This may be because they are concerned that their children may worry or due to the fact that there still appears to be a lot of stigma and embarrassment around having to rely on this service. There were a number of people we spoke to who were not aware of the Healthy Start scheme but were eligible. None of the food banks had posters or leaflets promoting the scheme. Healthwatch left a supply of leaflets and posters with each foodbank. We also raised awareness with staff so they could promote it going forward. Healthy Start could also be promoted and applied for at the Job Centre and GP practices, where vouchers for the local food banks are given out.

## Nursery Interview Findings

Healthwatch were provided with a list of ninety six nurseries across the borough. All of these were contacted via e-mail asking how they promote the healthy start vouchers. We also attached a link to the Health Start Re-launch day. Unfortunately, due to the school holidays and a number of nurseries being closed it was difficult to get a response from everyone. We also contacted a selection of 23 nurseries by phone. To sum up the findings from the conversations we had, none had literature to promote Healthy Start. Not all the people we spoke to were fully aware of the scheme and the criteria to be eligible. A number suggested that responsibility to promote the scheme rested with the midwives and the health visitors, whilst others commented that if they had leaflets and posters, they would definitely promote it.

## Case Studies

### **Mrs A**

Mrs A is a young mother of two children aged four and three and is claiming Universal Credit. We met her in a Bexley foodbank. She explained that she was aware of the Healthy Start scheme but had never been sure if she was eligible for it. She had never received any advice and therefore had not claimed the vouchers for her eldest son who is now too old. Her daughter is three and therefore still eligible. Mrs A was provided with some literature and an application form by Healthwatch and told how to apply.

### **Mrs B**

Mrs B is a nursery school manager. The nursery has an intake of approximately 100 children and provides morning and afternoon child care sessions. We spent time talking through the scheme with Mrs B and were able to provide her with leaflets, posters and application forms, none of which she had.

She was not aware of the Healthy Start voucher scheme. She informed us that approximately 25 families were using the two year offer of free childcare at the nursery. After reviewing the application form, she commented that the section where the health professional had to sign off the form would be a 'barrier'. She felt that when a baby is very young, parents are regularly taking them to the baby clinic where they have access to health visitors. Once a child reaches the age of two, those visits become less frequent. She felt that having to get a health professionals signature on the form, would dissuade parents from trying.

In addition, using her own daughter as an example, the manager commented that although not a Bexley resident, her daughter would be eligible for the scheme. However, her daughter has not seen a health visitor for months despite having two children and she felt her daughter would not pursue the application if she had to chase around getting a health visitor to sign it off. The Manager stated that nurseries are now supposed to be working in partnership with the health visitors, particularly around the two year health check. Her opinion was that Healthy Start needs to be communicated and distributed to mothers at a very early stage.

Lastly, she said she would like to know where to get Healthy Start literature from and would be happy to promote the scheme going forward to all parents at the nursery. Healthwatch left a supply of posters and leaflets but she would like the details of how to obtain more going forward.

## **Mrs C**

Mrs C is a mother of one child. She was made aware of the Healthy Start scheme by her health visitor at her child's two year health check. She filled out an application form and started to receive the vouchers. Mrs C is very disappointed that she was not advised sooner and has missed out on a lot. She finds the vouchers beneficial. She commented that using the vouchers at her local supermarket was easy, however problems did arise if she tried to use the self-service checkout. Quite often the scanner does not recognise the voucher so she has to seek help from a member of staff.

Mrs C also commented that she did not claim the vitamins. When asked why she thought they were tablet form and was worried her child would not be able to swallow them. She was not made aware the vitamins are in "drop" form and will now start to use her vitamin vouchers to claim these.



## Conclusion

The Healthy Start scheme questionnaire was well received by those parents who were eligible to claim. Those who were not eligible still took an interest in the information provided with many saying they would pass the information onto friends, family and colleagues in order to raise awareness.

Healthwatch found that of those we engaged with Healthy Start vouchers were used more in the north of the borough than the south with more parents being eligible for the scheme.

National and local barriers to the uptake of the scheme by parents were identified. Locally, the scheme needs to be consistently promoted and publicised more by midwives, health visitors, children's centres, baby clinics, nurseries, hospitals and food banks to ensure that eligible families are consistently reminded of the scheme. When Healthwatch visited Queen Mary's Hospital, it was noted that the Women's Health Department did not have any leaflets or posters on display promoting the scheme. There were several pregnant women in the waiting room, and this would be an ideal and prominent place to promote the scheme. Healthwatch were given permission to display posters in the waiting room and also left a stock of leaflets. The same can be said when we visited the foodbanks across the borough. Posters and leaflets could be displayed to capture those people who would really benefit from the scheme.

From talking to health professionals, there is confusion as to where promotional materials for the scheme are acquired and who is responsible for replenishing supplies. This information along with promotional material needs to be sent out to all health professionals and nurseries to ensure the scheme is publicised and the process understood. A short update session could be provided across the borough to ensure that all health professionals and nurseries are aware of the eligibility criteria and effective ways on how to promote the scheme.

Nursery schools should also be on board with promoting the scheme. Very few of the nurseries Healthwatch spoke to had posters or leaflets. A bigger concern is the amount of nursery staff not having sufficient knowledge about the scheme.

The uptake of vitamins was surprisingly low amongst those eligible for the scheme. This could be linked to them only being available to obtain at children's centres and baby clinics. Midwives, health

visitors and other stakeholders should continue to inform parents of the importance of using Healthy Start vitamins and where to get them from, to help increase uptake and the use of vouchers.

There are some concerns about the scheme on a national level and these are beyond the LBB direct control. The family income amount of £16,190 or less a year appears to be very low. On the Healthy Start website, it states that once an application form is received, filled out correctly and has been verified with HMRC Tax Credits or the Department for Work and Pensions, the vouchers should be issued within two weeks. This was not the case for a number of people we spoke to with the turnaround time taking much longer than two weeks. Some parents expressed frustration at not being able to get responses to emails they had sent to Healthy Start or being told to send another application.

Nationally the application form sign off could be revised. It is unclear why a health professional has to sign off the application form. Health visitors suggested the application form could be processed by using a copy of the child's birth certificate and parent's national insurance number. This may make the process easier for parents to claim the vouchers and alleviate parents having to see their GP or health visitor to get a form signed. It should also boost the uptake if parents have an easier way of sending off paperwork.

Lastly, the Department of Works and Pensions could play a more active role by incorporating a Healthy Start voucher leaflet when they send out their own paperwork.

The overriding conclusion from all the feedback offered, is that Healthy Start needs to be more effectively publicised in the Bexley Borough with a consistent approach from all partners that are involved in promoting or organising this important initiative.

## Recommendations

1. There needs to be a continued local marketing campaign by LBB to ensure the profile and importance of Healthy Start is maximised across all stakeholders in Bexley. The Healthy Start re-launch event on 20<sup>th</sup> September is a good starting place for this, however, it would be beneficial for health professionals to have more regular, smaller, events to discuss the uptake of Healthy Start and increase awareness of the scheme amongst professionals. Healthy Start could continue to be promoted in the Bexley magazine which is delivered to all households in the borough.

2. Information on what is available via Healthy Start and how to apply must be clearer for parents and introduced at an early stage, in a way that helps most parents feel confident and encouraged to apply. Repeat reminders are required for parents to apply or recheck eligibility. Healthy Start information is passed on to pregnant mothers but they may not apply straight away, perhaps they are coping with pregnancy and forget. Health visitors can capture any eligible mothers once their baby has been born and they are attending baby clinics. Nursery staff can promote the scheme as a child starts nursery and GP's could promote the scheme to parents of young children when they attend an appointment. If all health professionals promote the scheme consistently there is less chance of parents not being informed or missing out.
3. All those involved in supporting parents such as midwives, health visitors, nurseries, child minders and even GP's, could receive regular informal updates and reminders from LBB to promote Healthy Start and advise parents how to take advantage of the benefits. These updates could be two way and provide valuable information on how the scheme is being received and identify any problems that may arise.
4. Vitamins need to be made more accessible across the borough to those eligible. More places could be made available for parents to collect the vitamins from using their vouchers such as GP practices. Local chemists could be included which may also encourage people with minor illnesses to seek advice there rather than making a doctor's appointment.
5. Midwives, health visitors and other health professionals should continue to inform parents of the importance of using Healthy Start vitamins and where to get them from, to help increase uptake and the use of vitamins and vouchers.

## References

Healthy start (2019) Available at: <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/> (Accessed 13th September 2019)

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LBB, (2019) Obesity Strategy Available at: [https://www.bexley.gov.uk/sites/bexley-cms/files/2019-06/Bexley%20Obesity%20Strategy%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.bexley.gov.uk/sites/bexley-cms/files/2019-06/Bexley%20Obesity%20Strategy%20FINAL_0.pdf)

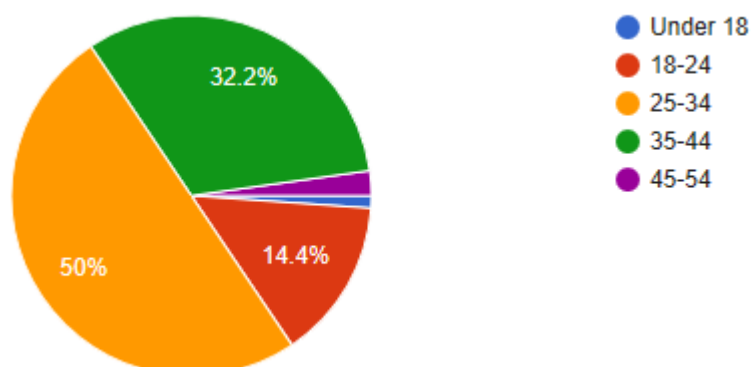
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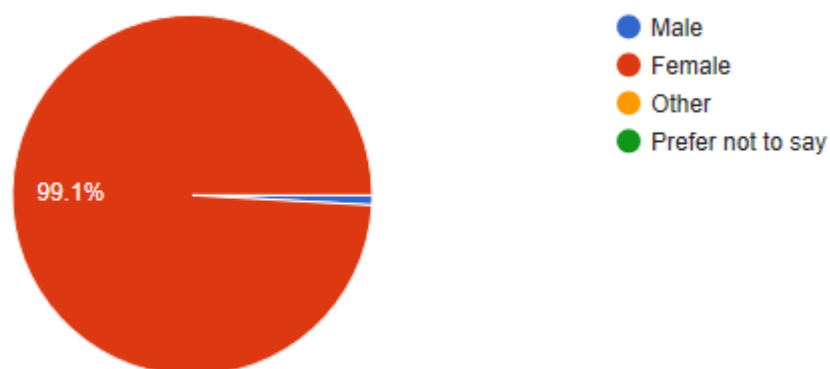
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## Appendix 1 – Demographics

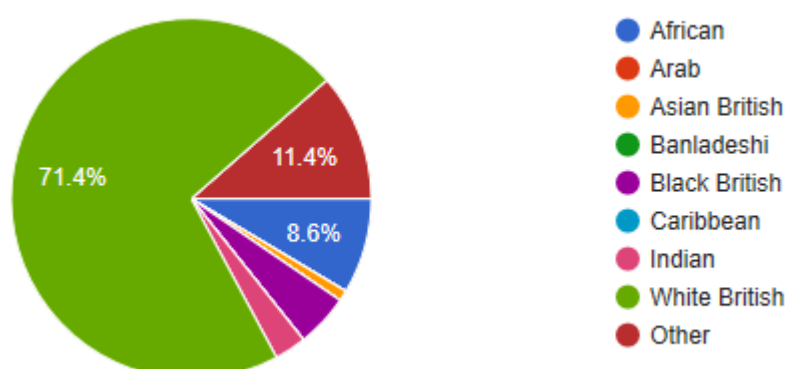
### Age



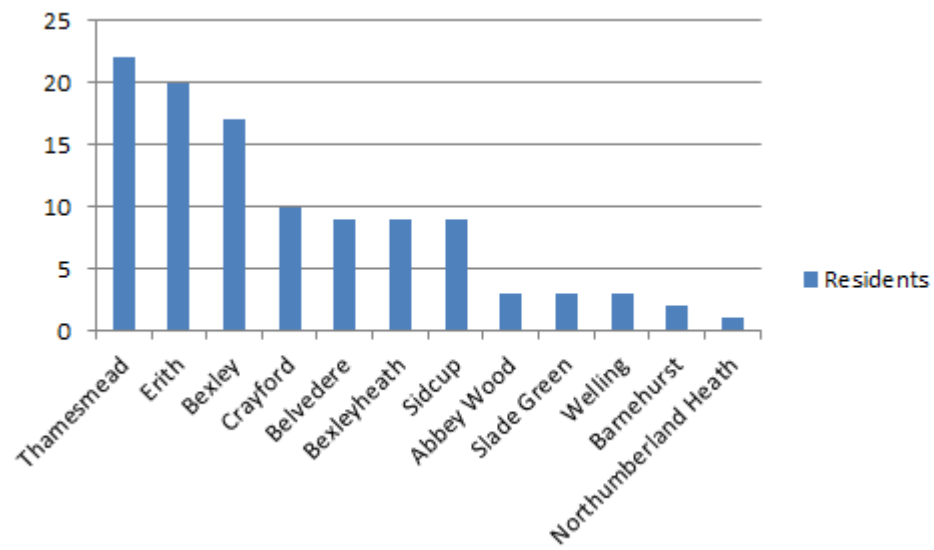
### Gender



### Ethnicity



18. Name of area living in



## Appendix 2 – Group and places visited

### **Events**

Danson Fun Day

Southmere Sundays, Thamesmead

### **Hospitals**

Queen Mary's Hospital Sidcup

Darenth Valley – Maternity Voices meeting

### **Focus Groups**

Danson Children's Centre (Health Visitors)

Barnard Centre Sidcup (Health Visitors)

### **Children's Centres & Food Banks**

Emmanuel Stay & Play

Danson Baby Clinic

West Street Baby Clinic

Howbury Baby Clinic

West Street Stay & Play (2 visits)

Danson Play Day 11-4

Lakeside Baby Clinic

West Street Stay & Play

Trinity Food Bank Bexleyheath (2 visits)

Howbury Baby Clinic

Queen Street Food Bank Erith

Crayford Library

New Community Food Bank Sidcup

Avery Hill Food Bank Sidcup