Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Cymru

Leading the way in Children's Health

Health Education and Improvement Wales Have Your Say: Help Shape the Future of Healthcare Education in Wales

November 2025

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) consultation, **Have Your Say: Help Shape the Future of Healthcare Education in Wales.**

As the professional body for paediatricians, RCPCH works to advance the knowledge, skills, and professional development of paediatricians and child health professionals in the UK and internationally. We deliver a comprehensive training curriculum, oversee postgraduate education, and offers a wide range of continuing professional development opportunities that help members stay current with clinical practice and research. Noting our expertise, this response will focus on the child health workforce, demands of future generations, and opportunities to advance best practice.

Recommendations

An NHS Wales Education Strategy must:

- Respond to current demands and future projections of populational health.
- Encourage a move towards a capability-based model of training with increased flexibility, broadening knowledge and including preventive healthcare as part of training. Our **Progress+ Curriculum** is an example of this.
- Safeguard Supporting Professional Activities (SPA) and ensure training responsibilities are valued by employers alongside clinical activities.
- Provide generalist and specialist IT literacy education to all professions and grades in the NHS to ensure the workforce is capable of utilising digital and AI advancements.

About RCPCH Wales

The RCPCH works to transform child health through knowledge, innovation and expertise. We have over 600 members in Wales, 14,000 across the UK and an additional 17,000 worldwide. The RCPCH is responsible for training and examining paediatricians. We also advocate on behalf of members, represent their views and draw upon their expertise to inform policy development and the maintenance of professional standards.

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A population-based approach

A healthy childhood is crucial for the future health of our population. Healthy children are far more likely to grow into healthy adults who contribute positively to society, both economically and socially. Early life experiences and conditions have a lasting impact on physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, a failure to acknowledge and address the challenges within child health will worsen future population health outcomes and will result in an increase in demand for adult services and require additional funding, staffing and resources for the NHS as well as impacting the wider economy.

The current state of child heath in Wales

- Obesity: Over a quarter (25.5%) of children aged 4-5 are obese or overweight
- Tooth decay: Nearly a third (32.4%) of children aged 5-6 have decayed, missing or filled teeth.
- Poverty: 31% of children live in relative income poverty
- Vaping: 9 out 10 (92%) teenage vapers are using highly addictive nicotine products with nearly half (45%) of all children who vape saying they can't go the whole school day without vaping.
- Smoking: 7% of children aged 15–16 still smoke regularly.
- Physical activity: Only 17% of children age 11-16 are active for at least 60 minutes a day, every day.
- Safeguarding: The proportion of children on the child protection register remains stubbornly high at 14% since 2017.
- Mental Health: 1 in 6 children and young people have a diagnosable mental health problem.

Given these figures it is not surprising that there are significant pressures on child health services, with workforce numbers insufficient to match the growing demand or to meet the increased complexity of children's health needs.

While **paediatric patient pathways** increased by 17.3% between July 2021 to July 2025, rising from 9,145 to 10,523, the number of **Full Time Equivalent (FTE) consultant paediatricians**, only increased by 7.8% between March 2021-2025. This translates to a 17.3% increase in pathways versus a 7.8% increase in consultants. This by no means plugs the gap in completing patient pathways that have built up over more than a decade. Added to this, investment in other child health professions have not kept up with demand.

There are persistent challenges with rota gaps and workforce shortages across the breadth of the child health workforce. As of March 2025, there were over 1,035 registered nurse **vacancies** in Wales, the number of FTE **Health Visitors** has seen a steady decline over the years, falling by 5.5% between March 2021 and March 2025, and Allied Health Professional colleagues have shared their difficulties in filling rotas.

The current state of child health and the lack of investment in the child health workforce can be linked with policy agendas and reforms not adequately addressed the needs of children within all-age policy documents.

While the **NHS Wales Planning Framework 2024-2027** did acknowledge that 'it is clear that the ongoing pressures are having a disproportionate impact on children and young people', child health continues to be overlooked with no actions to address this. The **NHS in 10+ years: An examination of the projected impact of Long-Term Conditions and Risk Factors in Wales** made very few references to children despite children being 20% of the population and the future of the nation. The HEIW and Social Care Wales (SCW), **A Healthier Wales: Our Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care** also did not reference the child health workforce, or children in general beyond noting agency spend on children services with 4% of posts filled by agency staff compared to 2% in adult services.

We recognise that improving child health is not solely the responsibility, or primary responsibility of HEIW. However, within this context, adopting a populational approach to the Education Strategy – one that allocates appropriate resources to the child health workforce and embeds prevention and early intervention – will significantly strengthen efforts to build a healthier generation.

Progress+ Curriculum

Progress+ is an updated, competency-based paediatric training curriculum implemented in 2023. It offers a streamlined and outcomes-focused approach to postgraduate paediatric training and allows for greater flexibility and personalisation of training.

The curriculum is built around key capabilities that reflect the realities of modern paediatric practice, including safeguarding, leadership, and communication. Progress+ offers several advantages for patient care by ensuring paediatricians are better prepared to meet the complex and evolving needs of children and young people. This includes:

1. **Improved clinical competence**: The curriculum focuses on key capabilities and outcomes, ensuring trainees develop the skills needed to deliver safe, effective, and evidence-based care.
2. **Flexibility and responsiveness**: By allowing trainees to progress based on competence rather than time, it supports a more adaptable workforce that can respond to service needs more efficiently.
3. **Focus on prevention and early intervention**: Embedding these principles in training helps clinicians identify and address health issues early, improving long-term outcomes.

4. **Better continuity of care**: With a more confident and capable workforce, patients benefit from consistent, high-quality care throughout their healthcare journey.

HEIW should view Progress+ as a future-focused curriculum, able to meet the growing and ever-changing demands of a population. This should be built into an NHS Wales Education Strategy.

Supporting Professional Activities (SPA)

The current workforce is overstretched, and at risk of burnout. The General Medical Council (GMC) **trainees and trainers survey** (2025) reported 64.6% of paediatric trainees and 50.7% of paediatric trainers in Wales were at high or moderate risk of burnout.

Adding to this, trainers are reporting finding it difficult to complete their responsibilities as trainers due to having such high clinical demands and pressures to reduce wait lists, with SPA being squeezed, despite being protected.

Paediatrics has a high percentage of Less Than Full Time (LTFT) training, and this is increasingly the case for consultant job plans too. However, trainers are given less and less time to be able to train their new colleagues, with SPA time under threat. The latest RCPCH data on advertised paediatric consultant posts from Advisory Appointments Committee activity shows an alarming decrease in average SPA time in paediatrics consultant job plans since the end of the pandemic.

Training, examining, and educating all make the future NHS service possible and should not been seen as system luxuries.

There needs to be clear guidance within the Education Strategy on SPA and trainer responsibilities, with an understanding that this is essential for supporting the next generation of doctors. Without training and examining, we cannot produce the high-quality doctors of the future.

Digital and AI advancements

The growing digital infrastructure within the NHS and rapidly expanding field of AI need to be considered by HEIW. An Education Strategy needs to consider how best to support the current workforce to be digitally literate but also consider how AI plays a role within education.

We recently (August 2025) published a guide to paediatrics trainees on the **Responsible use of artificial intelligence in ePortfolio entries**. The guidance explains how paediatric trainees and trainers can use AI ethically, safely and effectively in their ePortfolio practice.

RCPCH recognises that it is neither possible nor desirable to mandate that doctors should never use AI for ePortfolio entries. AI can be a useful tool to support aspects of personal and educational development including planning of written reflections, improving clarity and streamlining language.

We will not be asking ePortfolio users to declare use of AI, with the understanding that the principles of ePortfolio such as probity are abided by. However, Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools (GAIT) is being used more frequently in academic and professional writing to perform tasks, including reflections and when contributing to MSF (Multi-Source Feedback), such that very similar pieces are being seen within ePortfolios.

Using AI safely, effectively and critically is a skill that all doctors need to develop, this includes appropriate use of AI in recording and reflecting on training.

An NHS Wales Education Strategy should champion best practice of AI use in education and signpost to available guidance, such as ours.

Additional Resources

- RCPCH Wales, *Putting Children First*, 2025
- Welsh Royal Colleges Child Health Collaborative, *Working together to improve child health in Wales*, 2025
- RCPCH, NHS England Postgraduate Medical training review submission, 2025.