

Our manifesto for child health in Wales

From the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health - Wales

Foreword

The 2021 Senedd election will be unlike any other. The global pandemic means that we will be considering issues that we have never had to think about previously. What is clear to me and to my paediatric colleagues across Wales is that we must put children and young people at the centre of this election and make their health and wellbeing a national priority for the next Senedd.

The impact of the pandemic on health services, schools and in particular on children's mental health and wellbeing is of huge concern. We are also concerned that progress on a range of key issues for children's health that we identified before the pandemic has slowed down or even reversed as a result of all that has happened over the past year or so. We have consistently made the case for urgent progress on childhood obesity, mental health, oral health, on the paediatric and

child health workforce, on child health research and much more to give children and young people the start they deserve. Our State of Child Health reports over the past few years have presented data and detailed policy solutions to meet the broad range of challenges we face.

Right now, considering the scale of these existing challenges and the impact the pandemic has had on our children and young people, our message to policy makers, political parties and a future Welsh Government is clear and simple. We must commit to making the health and wellbeing of children a national priority.



Dr David Tuthill,
Officer for Wales
Royal College of Paediatrics
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Introduction

With about 19,000 members around the world and over 500 here in Wales, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) plays a major role in postgraduate medical education, professional standards, research and policy. It represents both paediatricians and the children we serve. Our vision is a healthier future for children and young people across the world.

We draw upon the expertise of our members to inform policy and practice as well as advocating for children's health to be at the centre of policy making. We want to see the next Welsh Government make the health and wellbeing of children and young people a national priority.

This is especially important if we are to build a better world after the global pandemic, the effects of which have been felt by every child and young person in Wales. Although most children and teenagers do not become seriously ill with COVID-19, the impact on their lives, education, services they rely upon and mental health and wellbeing has been immense. As paediatricians we are particularly concerned about those children who were already vulnerable or disadvantaged. Our experience is that the pandemic has exacerbated disparities that existed before the pandemic.

What children and young people told us:

"I access wellbeing support from school, but all ties have been cut so don't know where to turn."

"Mental health support, it's personal, you have to talk about it in front of your family now on the phone like "how are you on a scale of 1-10" and how you are feeling, people can hear you or hear through the walls so it's not private."

"Mental health services should be improved as so many young people are struggling."

RCPCH &Us Voice Bank 2020 (Wales)

Our *State of Child Health* reports provide a regular snapshot of children's health in Wales and across the UK, highlighting challenges we must meet around mental health, childhood obesity, oral health and much more. Poverty and inequality are drivers for almost all of these indicators. It is nowhere near enough to get back to where we were before COVID-19 - we have to meet these challenges and give our children and young people the start they deserve.

We call upon the next Welsh Government to make child health a national priority and take a range of actions across three main areas:

- Reduce child health inequalities.
- Prioritise public health, prevention and early intervention.
- Build and strengthen children's services.

Making clear commitments on each of these would provide a blueprint for a transformative agenda for child health in Wales.

1. Reduce child health inequalities

Data consistently shows that poverty and inequality impact a child's whole life, affecting their education, housing and social environment and in turn their health outcomes¹. The next Welsh Government should make tackling child health inequalities a top priority. This will require strategic, coordinated action across government to reduce child poverty and ensure that all children in Wales have the best start to life.

We call on the incoming Welsh Government to:

- Acknowledge high child poverty rates leading to unequal health outcomes and publish a revised strategy to meet this challenge.
- Provide national targets to reduce child poverty rates.
- Set specific targets for key areas of child health inequalities, with clear accountability across Government.

What children and young people told us:

"Schools worried about exams and not doing enough to move up so worry about it for the year 10s/11s."

"Free school meals are important - Breakfast club is really full at my school."

"Being able to speak in Welsh or English about personal problems is really important – it makes CYP feel more secure."

RCPCH &Us Voice Bank 2020 (Wales)

¹ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2020). *State of Child Health Wales*, p.5 and throughout. Available at: <https://stateofchildhealth.rcpch.ac.uk/evidence/nations/wales/>

2. Prioritise public health, prevention and early intervention

Focusing on prevention and delivering early intervention services for parents, children and families is vital. As well as the long-term economic savings for public services, it enables supporting children and young people to enjoy good health across their life course. Almost all of our priority indicators of child health can be improved if preventative measures are put in place – including mental health and wellbeing, as well as physical health.

We call on the incoming Welsh Government to:

- Deliver, monitor and evaluate ‘*Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales*’² and the ‘*All-Wales Breastfeeding Plan*’³, prioritising the policy, legislative, funding and public health messaging commitments.
- Recover and strengthen health visiting and early years programmes in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, with continued investment in the Healthy Child Wales Programme⁴ to ensure services connect with vulnerable children and families.
- Support, resource and evaluate the Together 4 Children and Young People programme to meet the needs of the ‘missing middle’ and deliver a whole school approach to mental health.⁵

What children and young people told us:

“Make less sugary and fatty foods by reducing intake to stop more obesity in the future.”

“There needs to be more physical activity for us when we go back and more fitness ideas because at home we’ve eaten more and not moved as much.”

“I think school did a lot [about health], more primary ‘Healthy Schools’ than secondary school. It’s important that it’s covered at school.”

RCPCH &Us Voice Bank 2020 (Wales)

2 Welsh Government (2019). *Healthy Weight Healthy Wales*. Available at:

<https://gov.wales/healthy-weight-strategy-healthy-weight-healthy-wales>

3 Welsh Government (2019). *All Wales Breastfeeding Five Year Action Plan*. Available at:

<https://gov.wales/breastfeeding-plan-2019-2024>

4 See Welsh Government (2016). *An Overview of the Healthy Child Wales Programme*. Available at:

<https://gov.wales/healthy-child-wales-programme-0>

5 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2020). *State of Child Health Wales* p24.

3. Build and strengthen children's services after the pandemic

Infants, children, young people and families should have equitable access to integrated health and community services, resources and advice to support their health and wellbeing. In the wake of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NHS staff and services, we also need to support recovery in our paediatric and broader NHS workforce.

We call on the incoming Welsh Government to:

- Invest in the child health workforce and work with Health Education and Improvement Wales to deliver sustainable staffing of paediatric services.⁶ and capacity for paediatric research to improve outcomes for children
- Support delivery of Together 4 Children and Young People's Neurodevelopmental Services Pathway.⁷
- Ensure that all children's services are reset and resourced to meet the needs of children whose education, relationships, development and wellbeing has been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

What children and young people told us:

"[We need] clear information, no waffle, more support for families and children and be able to choose how to see your doctor."

"More support for children and young people about bereavement because of COVID-19."

"Is it safe to go outside?"

RCPCH &Us Voice Bank 2020 (Wales)

6 For our most recent workforce information see Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2019). *Workforce Census: Focus on Wales*. Available at: <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/workforce-census-focus-wales-2019>

7 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2020). *State of Child Health Wales*, p24.

About us

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is leading the way in children's health.

Our College is the home of paediatrics in the UK and the professional body which sets and maintains standards for the education and training of all doctors working in paediatrics and child health.

We are an evidence-driven body and charity, working to improve the quality of medical practice for children in hospital and in the community. We work with children, young people and their families to inform our ideas, our training and our practice.

We are committed to an NHS that remains true to its founding principles – comprehensive, free at the point of care with equal access for all.

For further information about the issues we raise in this document, including resources on mental health, breastfeeding, service standards, childhood obesity and our State of Child Health report for Wales, which provides data from across the UK on thirty indicators of children and young people's health, visit www.rcpch.ac.uk.

We work closely with children and young people through our &Us engagement network and the quotes above are what children in Wales have told us over the past 12 months.

To get in touch, email our Policy and Public Affairs team in Wales at: wales@rcpch.ac.uk.



The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is a registered charity in England and Wales (1057744) and in Scotland (SCO 38299)