

Briefing: Keep the lifeline and stop the cut to Universal Credit

September 2021

Summary

In April 2020, the Government increased Universal Credit by £20 a week. The increased payments have provided a lifeline to millions of families since the start of the pandemic, helping to mitigate the worst of the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Paediatricians know about [the links between poverty and poor child health outcomes](#) and members see the impact of poverty in their practice every shift. Growing up in poverty makes children more likely to have worse health outcomes than their peers, which in turn limits their life chances.

If the cut goes ahead this autumn, [modelling by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation](#) shows a further 200,000 children will go in to poverty overnight. The impact of this on child health outcomes, health inequalities and the wider implications this has for their life chances are unconscionable.

Impact of the pandemic on children

Whilst children and young people have overwhelmingly been spared the worst of the clinical impact of COVID-19, the response to the pandemic – particularly the closure of schools to most children – has had [far-reaching negative effects](#) on their health and wellbeing.

COVID-19 has both compounded and exposed the inequalities entrenched in health. Deprived communities have [borne the brunt](#) of the wider negative impacts of the pandemic.

Poverty and Child Health

Children living in poverty are **more likely** to have the low birth weight, poor physical health like obesity and some chronic conditions and mental health problems. The health impacts of growing up in poverty are significant and follow children across their life course.

Before the pandemic, **over 4 million children** were living in poverty. Whilst we await the data, with growing unemployment, a recession, and the likely long-term health impacts of COVID-19, it is reasonable to assume that rates of child poverty will increase in the coming months and years. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that a **further 200,000 children** will be pushed in to poverty if the Government cuts Universal Credit payments.

Increasing rates of child poverty is perhaps the surest indicator that child health outcomes will continue to worsen, and inequalities will be further entrenched. The longer we fail to act, the more we are storing up problems for our children's futures, but also for our future as a country.

This trajectory is not set in stone - with bold action, we can reverse this trend.

Universal Credit

Investment in our social security system is also an investment in our nation's health, ensuring those living in poverty have access to essentials for good health like nutritious food and the ability to use central heating in the colder months.

Professor Michael Marmot **identified** the continuation of the increased payments of Universal Credit as one of the key things Government can do to ensure we build back better from the pandemic and reduce health inequalities.

Calls to Government

The proposed cut to Universal Credit would push 200,000 children in to poverty overnight. This will see them have worse health outcomes and stymie their life chances. This is unconscionable.

- **Keep the lifeline and not cut Universal Credit payments** to households across the UK. The Government should not proceed with the biggest cut to social security since the modern welfare state began.

In order to ensure all children get the best start in life, enjoy the best possible health and child health outcomes are levelled up across the country, we are calling on Government to undertake the following actions in addition to not cutting Universal Credit. As we recover from the pandemic, these calls must be implemented urgently. Our children and young people cannot afford to wait.

- **Implement an overarching child health strategy**, multi-departmental in approach; to help ensure existing health inequalities are not entrenched by COVID-19. This will also help to embed a child health in all policies approach to policy making.
- Develop and introduce a national, cross-government **strategy to reduce health inequalities** to complement the duty on ICS to ensure this, and to maximise the benefit of the key public health measures set out in the Health and Care Bill.
- **Provide ring-fenced funding of CAMHS and inpatient paediatric mental health services** that reflects local service demand.
- **Urgently increase funding to Local Authorities Provide sufficient funding for Local Authorities** commensurate to local population need. This must include restoring the **£1 billion of real-terms cuts** to the public health grant since 2015. Future investment in public health provision should increase at the same rate as NHS funding and be allocated based on population health needs.

About RCPCH

The **Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH)** is the membership body for paediatricians, representing more than 19,500 child health professionals in the UK and abroad. We are responsible for the training, examinations and professional standards of paediatricians across the country, and we use our research and experience to develop recommendations to promote better child health outcomes.

We are members of the **Inequalities in Health Alliance**, and echo their call for a cross-government strategy to tackle health inequalities, led by the Prime Minister.

For further information please contact:

Caitlin Plunkett-Reilly, Public Affairs and Campaigns Lead
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, London, WC1X 8SH
Tel: 020 7092 6006 | Email: caitlin.plunkett-reilly@rcpch.ac.uk

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