

Health and wellbeing of children and young people

A manifesto from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health - Northern Ireland

Foreword

The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election presents an important opportunity for political decision makers to fully consider the health and wellbeing needs of children and young people here. The collapse of the political institutions in 2017 led to three years of little progress and just as these institutions were re-established in 2020, and only a week after we published our *State of Child Health 2020* report, the pandemic changed everyone's plans and ability to address these crucially important matters.

Whilst most children and young people do not become seriously ill with COVID-19, the pandemic response has severely impacted them. Disrupted education, difficulty accessing child health services¹ and impacts on their physical and emotional wellbeing have been documented and reported. The effect of this is magnified among many of our most vulnerable children and young people. Yet there still seems to be a

Cinderella approach when prioritising policy, legislation, and service provision. The RCPCH is in no doubt that investing in children and young people's health will have a long-term positive outcome, not only for them as individuals, but for families and society in general.

As paediatricians we call on the incoming NI Assembly to create and embed a child rights-based Health and Social Care system and make child health and wellbeing a national priority.



Dr Ray Nethercott
Officer for Ireland
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health



¹ NICCY (2020) A New and Better Normal: Children and Young People's Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic; available at <https://www.niccy.org/media/3882/niccy-covid-report-main-report-final-aug-21.pdf>

Introduction

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) has over 20,000 members in the UK and internationally and sets standards for professional and postgraduate education. We work to transform child health through knowledge, research and expertise, to improve the health and wellbeing of infants, children and young people across the world.

Children and young people's voice is at the heart of everything we do. Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the RCPCH &Us Network facilitates children and young people to have their voices heard in decisions that affect them (Article 12) and work with them to help shape services so they have the best healthcare possible (Article 24).

The RCPCH draws upon the expertise of our members together with the voice of children and young people to inform policy and practice and to advocate for children's health to be at the centre of policy making. We want to see the next Northern Ireland Executive afford child health and wellbeing the highest-level priority. This is particularly important as we navigate the complexities of the pandemic, the effects of which will have been felt by every child and young person in Northern Ireland.

We call on the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to take a child rights-based approach and make child health a national priority in the next mandate and to take a range of actions across four main themes that will help to improve child health outcomes.

1. Transform system and services
2. Strengthen prevention and early intervention
3. Reduce child health inequalities and poverty
4. Support the child health workforce

1. Transform system and services

Paediatricians in Northern Ireland have known for some time that services for children are under significant pressure and too often we see the impact that waiting for treatment and assessment has on their health.² The effect of pandemic restrictions has made the situation worse, but as we recover and reset services³ there is a golden opportunity to change how we deliver health care.

We cannot expect long-term success in population health outcomes unless we prioritise how we deliver services for children and young people. The child health workforce is working extremely hard and always goes the extra mile to give children the best quality of care possible - but we have too many vacancies in both paediatrics and the wider child health workforce and not enough clinical leadership or resource to drive forward the improvements needed in the Health and Social Care System.

2 NICCY (2021) More Than a Number: A Rights Based Review of Child Health Waiting Lists in Northern Ireland; available at <https://www.niccy.org/media/3976/more-than-a-number-child-health-waiting-lists-in-ni-final-19-october-2021.pdf>

3 RCPCH (2020) Reset, Restore, Recover - RCPCH principles for recovery; available at <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/reset-restore-recover-rcpch-principles-recovery>

We call on the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Implement in full *A Strategy for Paediatric Healthcare Services Provided in Hospitals and in the Community (2016 - 2026)*⁴
- Formally link, and sufficiently resource, the neonatal, maternity and paediatric networks within a regional integrated care system and remove silos in delivering health services for children and young people
- Prioritise the delivery of the paediatric transformation workstream and the recovery of paediatric and child health services
- Prioritise the implementation of the recommendations of the Children's Commissioner's report *More Than a Number*⁵

Children and young people told us:

"We need to change the way we wait for appointments, with more treatments available here and make hospital's more child friendly, tailored to the needs of the people using the services"

"It would be good to have places that are open later and at weekends, where referrals happen quickly and where there is the right help for us in one place"

"We need to invest more in the NHS so that there are more doctors, more nurses and more centres that can support children and young people and extend this up to age 25, as well as doing more education to the public"

RCPCH & Us Young People, Northern Ireland

2. Strengthen prevention and early intervention

For too long child health in Northern Ireland has not been given appropriate priority. We must work to change this so that children and young people get the best start in life and are empowered and supported to look after their own health and wellbeing. It is vital that prevention and early intervention approaches are prioritised for children, young people and their families.

4 Department of Health (2016) *A Strategy for Paediatric Healthcare Services Provided in Hospitals and in the Community (2016 - 2026)*; available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/paediatric-strategy-hospital-andcommunity.pdf>

5 NICCY (2021) *More Than A Number: A rights based review of child health waiting lists in Northern Ireland*; available at <https://www.niccy.org/media/3976/more-than-a-number-child-health-waiting-lists-in-ni-final-19-october-2021.pdf>

The Northern Ireland Executive must play its role in ensuring regional approaches are embedded in evidence, proportionate to the need, and sufficient to make a long-lasting difference in health and wellbeing outcomes. This includes a focus on high priority areas such as obesity, mental health, breastfeeding and oral health.

26%
of 2-15
year olds are
overweight
or obese

We agree with children and young people that the climate crisis is the single biggest health threat facing humanity and its effects are especially detrimental to the health and wellbeing of children and young people. The RCPCH and UK Health Alliance for Climate Change (UKHACC), have declared a climate emergency and are calling for emergency action to limit global temperature increases, restore biodiversity and protect health.⁶

Only
22.2% of
babies being
exclusively
breastfed at
6 -8 weeks

RCPCH members have expressed their concern on mental health presentations in emergency care settings and are concerned that some children and young people are left without suitable support while awaiting, or in between mental health service referrals and provision.⁷

Almost
1 in 10 of
11-19 year olds
reported having
engaged in
self-injurious
behaviour

We call on the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Consult on, and publish, a successor strategy to *Breastfeeding - A Great Start, A Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013-2023*⁸; including bringing forward legislation to protect people breastfeeding in public
- Consult on, and publish, a successor strategy to *A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022*⁹
- Consult on, and publish, an Oral Health Strategy focused on prevention. This should include bespoke children and young people outcomes and indicators
- Create a bespoke green strategy for Health and Social Care to support actions intended to reach net zero targets on carbon emissions
- Prioritise effective delivery of the NI Mental Health Strategy¹⁰, and support this by commissioning a digital mental health and wellbeing app that provides timely, evidence based, clinically supported resources and interventions for children and young people awaiting or in between referrals and appointments for mental health treatment

6 RCPCH (2021) RCPCH joins global call for emergency action to tackle climate change; available at <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/rcpch-joins-global-call-emergency-action-tackle-climate-change>

7 RCPCH (2021) Meeting the mental health needs of children and young people in acute hospitals: these patients are all our patients; available at <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/meeting-mental-health-needs-children-young-people-acute-hospitals-these-patients-are-all>

8 DHSSPS (2013) Breastfeeding - A Great Start A Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013-2023; available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/breastfeeding-strategy-2014.pdf>

9 DHSSPS (2012) A Fitter Future For All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022; available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/obesity-fitter-future-framework-ni-2012-22.pdf>

10 Department of health (2021) Mental Health Strategy 2021 - 2031; available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mhs-strategy-2021-2031.pdf>

Children and young people told us:

“The things that help to keep us healthy, happy and well are access to healthy food, having places to go and things to do like free access to exercise clubs and the support of the NHS with things like sleep, mental health and eco distress”

“Climate change is present within our society and our world. We as young people can fix it with you, by spreading more awareness about how horrible things are getting and how we can change these things together”

“During COVID there have been challenges in regards to mental health, and struggles with their physical health, from a lack of access to medication due to shortages, or lack of access to physiotherapy, as well as the inability to see their doctors with telephone consultations often short”

“We need to have more discussions with adults about what is healthy but also what we might need as children and young people too that helps us to feel happy and make sure there is more focus on intervention services so that there is help before it gets really bad”

RCPCH & Us Young People, Northern Ireland

3. Reduce child health inequalities and poverty

Our *State of Child Health 2020*¹¹ report identified that in 2017/18, 24% of children in Northern Ireland were living in poverty after housing costs. Poverty and inequality impact a child’s whole life, affecting their education, housing and social environment and in turn impacting their health outcomes.¹² There are concerns that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic is pushing many families into poverty¹³ and this is compounded by rising energy costs and concerns around higher costs of living in general.

107,000
(or 24%)
children living
in relative
poverty

To enable children and young people to thrive, it is essential that a targeted, cross-departmental response to addressing the impact of poverty and inequality on health outcomes for children and young people is prioritised.

¹¹ RCPCH (2020) State of Child Health Northern Ireland; available at <https://stateofchildhealth.rcpch.ac.uk/evidence/nations/northern-ireland/>

¹² RCPCH (2020) State of Child Health Northern Ireland; available at <https://stateofchildhealth.rcpch.ac.uk/evidence/nations/northern-ireland/>

¹³ NICCY (2021) A New and Better Normal- Children and Young People’s Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic; available at <https://www.niccy.org/media/3882/niccy-covid-report-main-report-final-aug-21.pdf>

We call on the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Expedite the production of an anti-poverty strategy that includes bespoke children and young people outcomes and indicators. Monitor, and report on, the health impact of poverty on children, young people and their families and target intervention to where it is needed most
- Ensure children and young people's rights are taken into account in all decision-making processes for all policy development
- Health services should be designed and commissioned in such a way that structural barriers to achieving equitable health outcomes for children should be removed

Children and young people told us:

"We need to have access to more support for the family, in extended services and to know more about rights and how to create equal and fair access to support, so there is the same access to healthcare no matter their social class, age, religion or sexuality"

"We have to work together to make things fair, like giving free school meal tickets to everyone so people don't feel ashamed or embarrassed"

"We need help as we are worried about what we've lost over the last two years and that there is lots to catch up on with education, socially and support. We are worried about how we are going to catch it all back up. Things aren't fair – not everyone has access to devices and data and support at home and we need to make this more equal"

"To reduce inequalities, we need more opportunities that bring us together, to learn from each other and make everyone feel welcomed and treated the same being aware that not everyone has the same, equal start"

RCPCH & Us Young People, Northern Ireland

4. Support the child health workforce

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 healthcare staff and services, we also need to support recovery in our paediatric and broader child health workforce, which includes doctors and nurses, those involved in primary and secondary care, community and social care services as well as mental health settings.

To ensure children and young people receive high quality, safe and sustainable services the RCPCH developed a suite of *Facing the Future Standards*.¹⁴ Future-proofing child health services, through investment in the child health workforce and the implementation of these standards is necessary to drive forward the transformation and improvement in child health outcomes.

To achieve the highest standard of healthcare for children and young people we also need a resilient workforce that is supported to manage their health and wellbeing. *‘Investment in health and wellbeing services for the workforce reduces sickness, absence, improves ability to retain staff’*.¹⁵

We call on the incoming Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Create a bespoke child health workforce strategy which considers the breadth of the child health workforce including medical, midwifery, nursing, allied health professionals, clinical psychologists, pharmacists, health visitors and school nurses. The strategy should address recruitment and retention of the child healthcare workforce, ensure child healthcare workforce data is reliably and comprehensively modelled, and support the implementation of RCPCH *Facing the Future Standards*
- Invest in the health and wellbeing of the child health workforce, as set out in the *Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy*

Children and young people told us:

“We need workers who can talk to us in the right way for our age or needs, that creates a child and youth friendly place to see them and that are interested in what we want to talk about. They need to be trained in things that relate to our life like pronouns, mental health, Deaf awareness and it would be great if they can make slime!”

“Staff are always going over and above to support young people, so the worry there is that there isn’t enough funding for workers to be able to step up and do the even extra support for mental health”

“We think that the pandemic will have an impact on the wellbeing of staff who have now had to bring their work into their home, so they need help on how to manage their wellbeing going forward”

RCPCH &Us Young People, Northern Ireland

¹⁴ RCPCH Facing the Future – suite of standards for paediatric care; available at <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/facingthefuture>

¹⁵ Department of Health (2018) Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy; available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hsc-workforce-strategy-2016.pdf>

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 more information on issues raised in this document, please contact:

enquiries.ireland@rcpch.ac.uk | www.rcpch.ac.uk/ireland



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