

1. About the RCPCH

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) is responsible for training and examining paediatricians. The College 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.

2. Overview

The RCPCH has restricted responses to the relevant drivers as detailed against the stated strategic priorities.

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following Strategic Priorities meet the needs of children and young people?

3.1 **Championing all our children and young people and the positive impact of education on all aspects of life**

(a) **Put the interests of children and young people first and provide them with a greater voice in shaping their own future**

The RCPCH welcomes the inclusion of providing a greater voice to children and young people. The RCPCH are guided by the UNCRC and the RCPCH &Us Network facilitates children and young people to have their voices heard in decisions that affect them (Article 12). Putting the interests of children first in public policy can be facilitated with a Child Rights Impact Assessment.

3.2 **Helping all our children and young people where they need support for their learning and well-being**

(a) **Ensure every child and young person with additional or Special Educational Needs (SEN) has their needs identified and assessed as early as possible and receives provision which is timely and appropriate**

Often SEN is not identified until children start school, yet early identification and intervention is the most effective way of supporting these children and families. To achieve this objective there must be investment in universal early years programmes. The RCPCH asserts that the commitment within the Children and Young People's Delivery Plan (2021-24) to develop the Sure Start Programme for children aged 0-3 years within areas of greatest disadvantage as well as continuing to administer core funding to support and sustain the wider Early Years sector must be honoured.

Indeed, such programmes should be expanded and core funding enhanced so that all children can benefit from early years services, thusly allowing this objective to be meaningfully achieved. Our State of Child Health Report details that focusing on prevention and delivering early intervention services for parents, children and families can lead to economic savings for the NHS and wider public services, as well as supporting children and young people to enjoy good health across their life course. We therefore also welcome the commitment under the fourth strategic priority to develop an Early Years partnership approach with educators, health providers, parents, families and communities, working together to ensure all children are supported in their early development so they are ready to learn when they reach school age.

The RCPCH also welcomes the planned implementation of the SEN legislative framework, however, the NICCY *Too Little, Too Late* monitoring report highlighted poor co-ordination and communication between education and health in relation to the initial identification and diagnosis, assessment and implementation of support needs, and in the ongoing monitoring of support of the child's and family needs. It was recommended that there should be a review and revision of the arrangements for the planning, assessment, diagnosis and implementation of supports/services to ensure that key services work collaboratively. Reducing departmental silos and ensuring services for children are fully integrated will be key to ensuring holistic, joined up approaches.

(b) All our children and young people enjoy active lives and healthy minds

The RCPCH welcome the plan to fully implement the Emotional Wellbeing Framework, equitable access to support is essential in order to achieve the objective of 'healthy minds'. Due linkage with the overarching Mental Health Strategy as it pertains to children, young people and transitions will be key, particularly actions 6 and 7 (further promote positive social and emotional development throughout the period of infancy and childhood, including in pre-school and school settings, and provide enhanced and accessible mental health services for those who need specialist mental health services) respectively. Supporting wellbeing and support for mental health within schools was a recurring point of importance for the young people working with &Us in NI (2022).

Overweight remains problematic in NI with approximately 26% of 4–5-year-olds falling into this category according to our State of Child Health report. Moreover, the Department of Health's most recent Health Inequalities Annual Report highlighted a 3-percentage point variation between the most and least deprived with 7.7% of primary 1 age children in deprived areas reported as being obese compared to 4.7% in the least deprived. The RCPCH asserts that good nutrition lies at the heart of health and wellbeing for children and young people, as well as improving learning outcomes and dictating future health, therefore, a nutritional standards review as promised, would be most welcome and timely.

The RCPCH welcomes the Department of Communities Sport and Physical Activity Strategy (March 2022) which acknowledges the importance of early years and sustained engagement in physical activity at primary and post primary school and beyond. Ensuring that school-based sport activities are based on choice, are open to all abilities, are fun, inclusive and diverse is imperative. However, we understand that the Education and Training Inspectorate's recent review; *A thematic evaluation of physical education in primary schools* (October 2022) identified that the leaders in three-quarters of the schools targeted reported that, due to other perceived curricular demands and pressures, they are unable to implement fully the DE recommendation of providing children with at least two hours of PE each week. It is paramount this is addressed to facilitate achieving the outcome of 'enjoying active lives'.

(c) All children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to participate fully in education, leading to improved learning outcomes

We know that poverty and inequality affect educational attainment and entrench disadvantage, this priority is therefore key to breaking intergenerational disadvantage. Evidence has demonstrated the massive economic benefits for countries who place their children at the centre of their policies on health, education, and social care. By truly valuing all children, whatever circumstances they are born into, we create a healthier citizen, less dependent on the state in the future and more able to rise to the many challenges of modern-day life.

3.3 Inspiring all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society

(b) Provide all children and young people with the opportunity, knowledge, skills, experience and support to empower them to make a positive contribution to the economy and society

The RCPCH welcomes the plan to enhance our children's readiness for employment support with a particular focus on 14-19 year olds, in conjunction with the Department for Economy, the business community and other partners given that the RCPCH State of Child Health report highlights that education, employment and/or training opportunities for young people are important outcome measures with consequences not only for social and economic policy, but equally, as an upstream determinant of health. Life and employment readiness was a theme raised among young people working with our &Us network in NI (2022).

The RCPCH are also glad to see the inclusion of contributing to tackling climate change through the development of the school estate under this priority given that children are among the most vulnerable to the health risks of climate change. As a College, the RCPCH continue to call for targeted investment in climate-resilient, low-carbon and sustainable health and education services.

4. Measures

Further detail on measures and indicators and how these will be used to inform the direction of the Plan and the linkage with other strategies would be welcome.

For further information or queries, please contact anna.mcdaid@rcpch.ac.uk RCPCH Policy & Public Affairs Officer for NI