



**Royal College of
Paediatrics and Child Health**

Leading the way in Children's Health

Equality and Social Justice Inquiry into the Child Poverty Strategy

September 2023

Summary

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Child Poverty Strategy.

It is well known poverty disproportionately impacts children, driving health, social and economic inequalities which have a lasting negative effect on children's future outcomes. The RCPCH position statement on [Child health inequalities driven by child poverty in the UK](#) details the link between health and poverty as seen by paediatricians.

The Child Poverty Strategy has an opportunity to truly make a long-term difference to child poverty in Wales, but aspects of the strategy should be strengthened.

Recommendations

1. An improved emphasis on the connection between poverty and health inequalities.
2. An objective and priority focused on reducing health inequalities.
3. The inclusion of an action to support children and young people and their families to reduce the number of persistent school absences, with a particular focus on children living in poverty.
4. Clear milestones, timelines and targets detailing how every Ministerial department is working to address child poverty in Wales.
5. Outline the link between the [Children and Young People's Plan](#) and Child Poverty Strategy, and whether the Children and Young People's Plan will be updated for 2024-2025.

Link between Poverty and Child Health Inequalities

There is very little action within the Child Poverty Strategy relating to addressing child health inequalities and improving health outcomes of children living in poverty.

Health inequalities are the avoidable, unfair and systematic differences in health outcomes between different groups of babies, children and young people.¹

The drivers of health inequalities are the social, economic and environmental factors in which individuals live that have an impact on their health outcomes. This includes ethnicity, income, housing, climate change and being looked after by local authorities.

Children living in poverty are more likely to have poorer health outcomes including low birth weight, poor physical health, and experience mental ill-health. The health impacts of growing up in poverty are significant and follow children across their life.

Public Health Wales (PHW) have detailed they expect the 'cost of living crisis to push an even greater number of children into poverty, with significant public health implications that will worsen and further entrench existing inequalities in Welsh society'.²

A survey by the Bevan Commission (2023) found that one in five (21%) respondents living in a household with children reported reducing the size of their child's meal or their child being forced to skip a meal.³ Food insecurity hits families on low incomes harder, especially those with three or more children.⁴

UK-wide research further detailed households with children are at greater risk of hygiene poverty than households without children (8% compared to 5%), rising to 13% among households with three or more children. This was reported to have a significant negative impact on the child's participation in hobbies including sports, their mental and physical health and their school performance.⁵

¹ [Child health inequalities driven by child poverty in the UK - position statement | RCPCH](#)

² [Public Health Wales \(PHW\)](#)

³ <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Snapshot-of-poverty-in-winter-2023.pdf>

⁴ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/new-data-show-4-million-children-households-affected-food-insecurity>

⁵ https://thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Hygiene-Bank_2022_Hygiene_Poverty_report_v9.0.pdf

The link between poverty, the cost of living and child health outcomes and inequalities is undeniable.

In 2021, 50 organisations endorsed Mind the Gap which called on the Welsh Government to address health inequalities, and the link between poverty, health and the cost of living, with a cross-governmental strategy.⁶

While RCPCH Wales welcome the refreshed Child Poverty Strategy, which we hope will be prioritised, to strengthen the strategy further, the Welsh Government should consider introducing a health focused objective and priority that seeks to address health inequalities.

Recommendation One: The Welsh Government should improve the emphasis on the connection between poverty and health inequalities within the Child Poverty Strategy.

Recommendation Two: An objective and priority focused on reducing health inequalities.

School attendance

It would be beneficial for the Welsh Government to outline what it is doing to address school absences within the Child Poverty Strategy.

Welsh Government statistics show that during the last academic year, 18.1% of pupils (age 5-15) were persistently absent in maintained schools. This rises to 34% for those eligible for free school meals.⁷

Over two third (67.6%) of absences were 'authorised'. The most significant reasons for authorised absences were due to ill-health (42.7%) with a further 3.6% for doctor and/or dentist appointments.⁸

Children with chronic conditions, both mental and physical, can experience difficulties in attending school and may require additional support. The availability of supportive services needs to be universal. To ensure the whole-school approach and community focused school model is inclusive of everyone, it needs to consider how to support children and their families to improve school attendance. This should include a move towards greater collaboration between primary, community and

⁶ [Mind the Gap](#)

⁷ <https://www.gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-5-september-2022-24-july-2023>

⁸ <https://www.gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-5-september-2022-24-july-2023>

secondary care and education providers with the pupil's wellbeing at the centre – a holistic approach with early identification and intervention could improve school attendance and future outcomes for that child.

Monitoring and reporting

To improve monitoring and reporting the Child Poverty Strategy should be strengthened with the inclusion of clear milestones, timelines and targets detailing how every Ministerial department is working to address child poverty in Wales.

Currently the draft Child Poverty Strategy outlines the strategy will be reported within the wider Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act 2015 national milestones. While this is a sensible approach as it measures the long-term collective progress towards a more sustainable Wales, it has the potential to limit the detail needed to report on the success and/or challenges faced when delivery this strategy.

RCPCH Wales welcome the Welsh Government national milestone commitment to 'reduce the poverty gap in Wales with certain key and protected characteristics, and those without those characteristics by 2035 and committing to set a stretching target for 2050'.⁹

However, given the gravity of the child poverty and the essential need to reduce the impact of child poverty, RCPCH Wales questions whether there should be a standalone annual report on child poverty that monitors the delivery of specific actions, timelines and milestones and what every Ministerial department is doing to contribute to the Welsh Government's efforts to reduce child poverty in Wales. This would allow for an in-depth insight into efforts to reduce child poverty, while reporting against the national milestone can continue to provide the progress against the Welsh Government's long-term overview aim.

⁹ <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-shaping-wales-future-laying-further-national-milestones-measure-our-nations#:~:text=Tackling%20wider%20inequalities%20is%20a,and%20committing%20to%20set%20a>

In summary, RCPCH Wales welcome the provision of progress updates against the poverty related national milestone but believe it is key that there is also a reporting mechanism in place so that progress is reported on more frequently and in more depth.

Recommendation Four: Clear milestones, timelines and targets detailing how every Ministerial department is working to address child poverty in Wales.

Children and Young People's Plan

The publication of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) was welcomed by RCPCH Wales as it set out how the Welsh Government would support children, young people who are growing up, living and working in Wales with tackling child poverty and inequality being the central driver.

RCPCH would encourage the Welsh Government to outline how the CYPP and the Child Poverty Strategy interlink as well as outlining how both will promote child safety and safeguarding of vulnerable children.

When children experience poverty and trauma at the same time, the impacts can be even more profound and damaging and can extend well beyond childhood.¹⁰ As a result there is a need to ensure there are enhanced plans for safeguarding, safe places for study and relaxation and the role of trusted adults.

It would be beneficial to detail within the Child Poverty Strategy if the CYPP will be updated for 2024-25. This would be a similar approach to how the Child Poverty Strategy outlines ongoing work with Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales and the renewed mental health strategy.

RCPCH Wales calls on the Welsh Government to review the delivery of the current CYPP and ensure future iterations form a comprehensive strategy that will address both physical and mental health outcomes and health inequalities. Any further iteration should continue to explain the complex work that Ministers will need to do together to turn ideas and commitments into actions.

¹⁰ <https://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/about-us/about-poverty-and-trauma/#:~:text=There%20is%20also%20evidence%20that,can%20extend%20well%20beyond%20childhood.>

The Welsh Government should further consider population segmentation in future strategies, plans and policy statements to ensure children and young people at every stage of life receive the attention they require. For example, this could take the form of a separate policy statement for adolescents (post puberty to 17 and beyond), that recognises the demands and neurodevelopmental biases of this population.

Recommendation Five: Outline the link between the [Children and Young People's Plan](#) and Child Poverty Strategy, and whether the Children and Young People's Plan will be updated for 2024-2025.

About RCPCH Wales

The RCPCH works to transform child health through knowledge, innovation and expertise. We have over 500 members in Wales, 14,000 across the UK and over 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. We are grateful to the Health and Social Care Committee for the opportunity to help inform scrutiny of the Welsh Government's plan to Transform Planned Care Service and Reduce Waiting Times.