



## **RCGP Cymru Wales Response to the Welsh Government's Draft Child Poverty Strategy 2023**

RCGP Cymru Wales is supportive of Welsh Government's ambition to lift families out of poverty, however we are disappointed to read the aims of the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy as merely mitigating the perceived inevitable descent into poverty for more of the children of Wales.

Wales has the worst child poverty rates of any nation in the UK<sup>1</sup> and, while the strategy references cross-portfolio working, the government departments mentioned (i.e., Education, Social Justice and Children and Young People) are those which work directly and expressly with children and young people. RCGP Cymru Wales calls for a whole-government approach, creating direct action to alleviate child poverty across all departments that impact on the lives of children.

Departments including Health, Housing and Transport must be asked to deliver if we are to truly have a positive impact on the lives of children currently living in poverty. RCGP Cymru Wales calls for each of these departments to produce plans for how they are going to aid the reduction of the numbers of children living in poverty, which should then be fed into this strategy.

In January 2023, the NHS Confederation Health and Well-being Alliance subgroup on Health inequalities, wrote to the Social Justice Minister with a call to do more to reduce health inequalities as 'everything affects health.' Here we make the same call to all government departments which touch on children's lives.

RCGP Cymru Wales notes that health inequalities are not expressly mentioned in the strategy. Children living in poverty are likely to have developed health conditions or to have family members who are not in good health<sup>2</sup>. The cyclical nature of poverty is that any initiative to lift these families out of poverty must be concurrent with the restoration of good health<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Poverty Report 2023: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2023>

<sup>2</sup> RCPH Child Health Inequalities Statement: <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/child-health-inequalities-position-statement>

<sup>3</sup> RCPH Child Health Inequalities Statement: <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/child-health-inequalities-position-statement>

This could mean care for parents with diabetes, those who need smoking cessation, support with alcohol dependency<sup>4</sup> or treatment for chronic pain conditions. RCGP Cymru Wales points out that all the above services are provided by primary care. Health services are vital in lifting families out of poverty, but the strategy does not acknowledge this.

For example, across the UK, work coaches provided by the DWP are being inserted into GP surgeries<sup>5</sup> in acknowledgment that people's health and working lives and inextricably intertwined. This approach must be shared by Welsh Government. The example of work coaches is also showing that non-devolved areas could work with Welsh Government's remitted areas to do more than prevent the inevitable decline of quality of life in Wales.

We remind Welsh Government of its pride in being the first government to legislate for future generations and we encourage it to utilise the levers at its disposal to ensure that children in Wales can be assured of a prosperous future.

RCGP Cymru Wales notes that many of the projects highlighted as working towards the strategy have either not been updated for some time or are yet to launch following pilot phase. While there are many initiatives detailed under each objective, that RCGP Cymru Wales supports, they must be given appropriate resources and publicity to encourage uptake and success must be quantifiable.

As the Draft Child Poverty Strategy contains reference to many other policies and initiatives, which may be confusing for families, RCGP Cymru Wales notes with interest the Bevan Foundation's suggestion of a single point of access for all of what it calls 'the Welsh benefits.' We would encourage Welsh Government to have simplicity in mind when promoting its offerings to the public.<sup>6</sup>

Below we have taken each objective to provide further detail on how the strategy could be improved:

### **Objective 1: to reduce costs and maximise the incomes of families**

This objective does not contain timescales for the adoption of pilot schemes such as Universal Basic Income for care leavers if supported by the data.

The use of frequent pilot schemes is not clear or consistent for families. Baby Bundles were first trialled in 2020 and evaluation was completed in 2022, however the Welsh Government page does not include a date for the roll out. With the current cost of living

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<sup>4</sup> Shortt, N et al, 2015, A cross-sectional analysis of the relationship between tobacco and alcohol outlet density and neighbourhood deprivation, BMC Public Health:

[https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-2321-](https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-2321-1#:~:text=Smoking%20and%20heavy%20alcohol%20consumption,causes%20%5B5%2C%20%6%5D.)

[1#:~:text=Smoking%20and%20heavy%20alcohol%20consumption,causes%20%5B5%2C%20%6%5D.](https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-2321-1#:~:text=Smoking%20and%20heavy%20alcohol%20consumption,causes%20%5B5%2C%20%6%5D.)

<sup>5</sup> DWP Work Coaches, <https://jobhelp.campaign.gov.uk/work-coach-role/>

<sup>6</sup> Bevan Foundation, Feasibility Report Welsh Benefits, 2023

<https://www.bevanfoundation.org/resources/welsh-benefits-feasibility/>

crisis, more parents than in previous years would benefit from this initiative. However, there is no news of when it will be rolled and out no indication as to who will be eligible.

The Draft Child Poverty Strategy does not include support for breast feeding mothers. Formula is extremely expensive, while breast feeding is free and convenient. However, the first few weeks can be extremely challenging and isolating if proper support is not provided - breast feeding support sits firmly within the mandate of Welsh Government.

Women from poorer backgrounds who live in the global west are less likely to breastfeed than those from privileged backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> Despite the assertion that Welsh Government is doing everything it can, there is a lack of help with housing costs in the objective. According to the charity Children in Wales,<sup>8</sup>[Obj.](#)

### **Objective 2: to create pathways out of poverty so that children and young people and their families have opportunities to realise their potential**

We have noticed a trend for education in Wales to concentrate on the lowest common denominator<sup>9</sup>. However, for many children living in poverty, the only barrier to academic achievement is poverty itself<sup>10</sup>. RCGP encourages engagement between medical schools and children from all backgrounds. RCGP Cymru Wales calls on Welsh Government to consider incentivising children from poorer backgrounds into better paid jobs where there is currently a labour shortage, such as medicine.

We strongly support initiatives for autistic children, whilst acknowledging that autistic children make up between 1-3% of learners in Wales RCGP Cymru Wales feels that for the vast majority of children living in poverty, simple solutions focused on enabling them to get the best of mainstream education is paramount. Welsh Government must take a 'both/and' approach to promote inclusive education, which appropriately stretches children according to their own talents and does not favour either academic or vocational training.

As RCGP Cymru Wales Chair, Dr Rowena Christmas writes " pupils eligible for free school meals are twice as likely to miss school" and while each family will be unique, reasons which may range from lack of transport, to caring responsibilities, to lack of appropriate equipment are common and can be solved by engaging the right support network around the child.

Those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are often judged by academic professionals to produce inferior quality work, according to a study by the British

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<sup>7</sup> Newhook et al, 2017, Poverty and Breastfeeding: Comparing Determinants of Early Breastfeeding Cessation Incidence in Socioeconomically Marginalized and Privileged Populations in the FiNaL Study, Health Equity:

[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6071891/#:~:text=Breastfeeding%20is%20an%20issue%20of%20health%20equity.&text=Socioeconomically%20marginalized%20\(SEM\)%20populations%20with,levels%20of%20income%20and%20education.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6071891/#:~:text=Breastfeeding%20is%20an%20issue%20of%20health%20equity.&text=Socioeconomically%20marginalized%20(SEM)%20populations%20with,levels%20of%20income%20and%20education.)

<sup>8</sup> Children In Wales, 2023: <https://www.childreninwales.org.uk/professionals/our-work/child-poverty/>

<sup>9</sup> BBC 2023, Science and languages shake-up in new Wales GCSEs:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpr4319qvd1o>

<sup>10</sup> [Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/library/record/item/MP-10-Equality-of-access-and-outcomes-in-higher-education-in-England)

Psychological Society<sup>11</sup>. Anecdotally, it is common to see children from poorer backgrounds being less confident in their abilities. Welsh Government must factor this stigma into the strategy and end the belief that background directly affects aptitude.

A specific barrier to academic qualifications for girls that concerns RCGP Cymru Wales is period poverty. According to the charity Plan, every year in the UK around 2 million girls miss school because of their period<sup>12</sup>. Encouraging use of green and reusable feminine hygiene products, including those such as the menstrual cup, would assist in reducing the expense. RCGP Cymru Wales notes that there is no reference to Welsh Government's Period Dignity Action Plan in the Draft Child Poverty Strategy, which was last updated in October 2021.<sup>13</sup> Reconfiguring school toilet facilities to allow for use of menstrual products i.e., each cubicle with its own sink would also assist in keeping girls in education.

**Objective 3: to support child and family wellbeing and make sure that work across Welsh Government delivers for children living in poverty, including those with protected characteristics, so that they can enjoy their rights and have better outcomes**

Again, RCGP Cymru Wales notes no reference is made to health inequalities under this section. We suggest that while mental health is important, it should not be considered in isolation, as health in all respects will affect life chances of children.

We also note that here, housing could be taken into consideration. As was discussed during the winter of 2022, cold homes directly cause and exacerbate ill health, having a negative impact on well-being.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the reference to 'Wales: A play friendly country', this strategy was last updated in 2014. Since then, we have experienced a global pandemic with lockdowns which affected children's abilities to interact with one another and engage in play<sup>15</sup>. This strategy therefore must be updated for the times in which we are living.

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<sup>11</sup> British Psychological Society, 2022: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news/children-lower-socio-economic-backgrounds-receive-lower-grades-due-unconscious-bias-reveals>

<sup>12</sup> Plan UK, 2022: [https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/nearly-two-million-girls-in-the-uk-miss-school-because-of-their-period#:~:text=Nearly%20two%20million%20girls%20\(64,children's%20charity%20Plan%20International%20UK.](https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/nearly-two-million-girls-in-the-uk-miss-school-because-of-their-period#:~:text=Nearly%20two%20million%20girls%20(64,children's%20charity%20Plan%20International%20UK.)

<sup>13</sup> Welsh Government Period Dignity Strategy: <https://www.gov.wales/period-dignity-strategic-action-plan-html#:~:text=With%20a%20broader%20focus%20on,practical%20and%20dignified%20way%20possible.>

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons Library, Cold or Damp Homes, 2022: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9696/>

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge University, COVID ruptured skills of worlds poorest children: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/covid-has-ruptured-social-skills-of-the-worlds-poorest-children-study-suggests#:~:text=All%20pupils'%20social%20skills%20declined,among%20those%20from%20rural%20set> tings.

**Objective 4: to ensure children, young people and their families are treated with dignity and respect by the people and services who interact with and support them and to challenge the stigma of poverty**

As mentioned above, it is not just child focused services which interact with children. Health and care sectors need to communicate to ensure history is shared more easily between services. It can be undignified having to repeat history each time. We reiterate our call for cross-government working, ensuring that all departments which impact children are included in this strategy.

**Objective 5: to ensure that effective cross -government working at the national level enables strong collaboration at the regional and local level**

As above, we call strongly for cross portfolio working across all areas of Welsh Government. We note mentions in the Draft Strategy of initiatives undertaken by the Social Justice, Children and Young People, Education departments and the Commissioner for Future Generations. However, the experiences of children in poverty are interwoven throughout every government department and this must be reflected.

The strategy makes no mention of collaboration with the health department, despite poverty being the number one factor affecting the health of children in Wales. Welsh Government cannot attempt to lift children out of poverty without recognising this impact. Children who do not have access to nutritious food and green space will not be in good health, and work will need to be done by health services, including primary care, to treat health conditions caused by poverty before these children can go on to live healthy and active lives.

**Our calls**

For the reasons stated above, we call on Welsh Government to develop this Strategy further, including a more wide-spread response across all departments. We ask for health inequalities to be given their due weight as a lever firmly in Welsh Government's control and as a main factor in the lives of the children in poverty.

