

Public Health Challenges in Wales: A briefing for AMs

This briefing sets out the public health challenges in Wales and the steps needed most urgently over the course of the fifth Assembly to aid the sustainable health and well-being for the people of Wales.

The Welsh NHS Confederation is the only national membership body which represents all the organisations that make up the NHS in Wales: the seven Local Health Boards and three NHS Trusts. Our role is to support our members to improve health and well-being by working with them to deliver high standards of care for patients and best value for taxpayers' money. We act as a driving force for positive change through strong representation and our policy, influencing and engagement work.

Key Points

Wales has made great strides in improving the health and well-being of its population. We are living longer, fewer of us are dying from infections and we have better health and care services. However, we still face a significant number of public health challenges.

While the negative impacts of obesity, drinking above the guidelines, smoking and low levels of physical activity have been well documented, there are other factors that impact on health and well-being, resulting in an ever-increasing demand being placed on the health and care service.

The economic, social and natural environment in which we grow up, live and work is a major determinant of our health and well-being. As the future Public Health (Wales) Bill is discussed

and debated in the National Assembly, we ask Assembly Members to recognise these areas and their impact. We are specifically calling for the implementation of a 'Health in All Policies' approach, with all public sector organisations being required to conduct Health Impact Assessments on future policies.

The next five years represent a critical period of transformation in health and care services in Wales. The NHS will continue to work across Government and public sector partners to invest time and resources in services that promote health and well-being and shift resources towards community based interventions. To achieve a healthier, happier and fairer Wales, it is also key that people are empowered and informed to take responsibility for their own health and well-being.

Current Public Health Challenges in Wales

Population changes

- The **population of Wales** is projected to increase by almost 9%, from around 3.1 million in 2011 to over 3.3 million in 2036. The 65 to 84 and 85+ age groups are projected to have the largest increase by 2036, when an estimated 1 in 4 people in Wales will be aged 65 and over. As the population grows older, the number of people living with long term health conditions will continue to increase.

Wider determinants of health

- **Poor quality housing**, including issues such as mould, poor warmth and energy inefficiency, infestations, overcrowding and noise are linked to physical, mental and respiratory ill health.
- **Active travel**, such as cycling and walking instead of driving shorter journeys, has the double benefit of improving physical fitness and reducing air pollution.
- **Violence** is a major cause of poor physical and mental health. In Wales, domestic abuse costs public services £303.5 million per year.
- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** are associated with over half of cases of violence and drug abuse and nearly a quarter of current adult smokers in Wales.
- **Environmental** risks to health include urban outdoor air pollution, unsafe water, indoor smoke from solid fuels, lead exposure and global climate change. Breathing polluted air increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, respiratory disease and lung cancer.

Health behaviours

- Approximately 1 in 5 adults in Wales **smoke**, causing 18% of adult deaths and costing £386 million per year to the NHS.
- Each year **physical inactivity** costs the Welsh economy £314 million per year.
- A majority of people (58%) in Wales are either **overweight** or **obese**.
- In Wales alone, **alcohol misuse** directly leads to over 1,500 deaths each year at a total cost of £100 million.
- **Substance misuse** has a significant impact on society. The combined economic and social costs of alcohol and Class A drug misuse in Wales is estimated to be around £2 billion.

Health and well-being outcomes

- There are significant **health inequalities** in Wales. The Public Health Wales Observatory estimates the average life expectancy of a male living in the least deprived area of Wales is 9 years longer than that of a male living in the most deprived. When we consider healthy life expectancy, this gap is 19 years. For females, the gaps are similarly persistent – 7 years for life expectancy and 18 years for healthy life expectancy.
- In Wales, 13% of adults reported having a **mental health** condition in 2015 compared to 9% in 2003/4. Mental ill health is associated with worse physical health, increased health risk behaviours, poor education and unemployment.
- In Wales, 779 people were admitted to hospital in 2015 due to **influenza**, 125 of whom received treatment in intensive care.

Protecting health and communicable diseases

- **Screening** is a process of identifying apparently healthy people who may be at an increased risk of disease or condition.
- The NHS provides free **immunisations** and **vaccinations** to every child to protect them from potentially serious diseases, including diphtheria, tetanus, polio, MMR and Meningitis C among others.
- **Resistance to antimicrobials** poses a significant threat to public health, with the emergence of resistance to a wide variety of agents, making them ineffective. The supply of new replacement antimicrobials has slowed and there are fewer options to treat infectious diseases.
- Public Health Wales has found that since 2013 there have been sharp increases in **blood borne viruses** and **sexual health cases**, including the number of cases of hepatitis B, hepatitis C, herpes and chlamydia.
- **Hygiene and food poisoning** can cause ill health. The Food Standards Agency estimate that around one million people in the UK suffer from a foodborne illness of some kind each year.

Public Health in Wales

The challenges above shows the breadth of public health as both diverse and complex. Public health is generally associated with the health of the entire population, rather than the health of individuals. The three domains of public health practice in the UK are: health improvement; health protection; and improving services. In Wales the role of Public Health Wales NHS Trust is to protect and improve health and well-being and reduce health inequalities for people in Wales and all Health Boards have responsibility for public health.

Wales has led the way in many public health policies and legislation, such as the ban on smoking in public places, and we would urge political parties to keep up this momentum. While legislation and policy-making are only two of many strands in addressing Wales' public health challenges, they can play a vital role in changing behaviour. The development and implementation of policies that help to create the right conditions that will support people to make healthier lifestyle choices are key to securing the health of our nation and we have an opportunity to deliver this through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is the first legislation in the world to link with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals by putting in place seven well-being goals for Wales to make sure we are all working towards the same long-term vision. Through the Act, and the recently published Welsh Government Public Health Outcomes Framework, we have an opportunity to measure and monitor the health of the Welsh population and understand the impact our individual behaviours, public services, programmes and policies are having on health and well-being in Wales.

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The ways you can support the Public Health (Wales) Bill

As well as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the new Public Health (Wales) Bill provides a key opportunity for Assembly Members to discuss and highlight the range of different public health areas, the key ways to improve the health and well-being of the population and the importance of placing Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) on a statutory footing.

The HIA process is a way to consider the extent to which the health and well-being of a population may be affected, whether positively or negatively, by a proposed policy, plan or programme and can identify any inequalities which may arise from it. Through HIAs, amendments can be suggested and enacted to emphasise health benefits and minimise any risks to health.

At stage 1 of the previous Public Health (Wales) Bill, introduced in June 2015, the Health and Social Care Committee heard from stakeholders that mandatory HIA would provide a mechanism to avoid or minimise negative impacts on the health and well-being of communities, and maximise health benefits where possible. As a result the Bill was amended at stage 3 by Welsh Government amendments introducing a requirement for public bodies to carry out HIAs.

As well as the need to introduce HIAs, the new Public Health (Wales) Bill is a chance to highlight the need for an open and honest conversation with the public about what the NHS can provide in the future. While the NHS is free at the point of contact, it is not free of obligation, and the public will need to be supported in taking more responsibility for their own health. Patients need to become partners in managing and improving their health, rather than passive recipients of healthcare. Patients expect to be asked about their health behaviours, if they are not discussed the perception is that unhealthy behaviours are not as important in addressing illness or disease risks as perhaps pharmacological/ invasive interventions. The NHS also needs to manage expectations and help patients understand exactly which services the NHS can deliver, and what steps patients can take to improve and protect their health and well-being – an approach often badged as ‘making every contact count’.



A vision for public health in Wales

The Welsh NHS Confederation believes a healthier, fairer and happier Wales is within our reach and can be achieved by:

- Agreeing a **long-term strategy** that involves organisations from across the public sector to encourage collaborative working to reduce inequalities in health outcomes;
- Ensuring impacts on health, well-being and equity are known and harms are minimised and mitigated through adopting a '**Health in All Policies**' approach across sectors;
- **Investing in prevention and early intervention** to support and maintain people's well-being and prevent ill health for as long as possible (as recently highlighted by Public Health Wales NHS Trust in their document "Making a Difference: Investing in Sustainable Health and Well-being for the People of Wales");
- Committing to improve public health through further development and implementation of policies that will create the right conditions to **support people to make healthier choices**;
- **Empowering, encouraging and informing people** to take personal responsibility for their health and shape their own care around their individual needs;
- Keeping people healthier through a greater emphasis on **primary and community care**;
- Engaging the entire **public sector workforce** in public health and prevention;

- Supporting a **culture change** among the public in terms of making healthier choices and reducing reliance on NHS services; and
- **Investing in preventive interventions** which are based on evidence and offer value for money.

Conclusion

With the introduction of the Public Health (Wales) Bill, now is the time for us all to act together. Through a systems approach - sharing our collective assets, following the principles of sustainability and prudent healthcare and complying with our unique legislation, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, we have the opportunity and responsibility to work collaboratively across sectors and organisations. It is essential to listen to and empower our people, and to appreciate the assets within our communities, allowing them an equal part in all decisions and plans for their life, health and happiness. Assembly Members have a key role to ensure that together we can achieve a healthier, happier and fairer Wales.

How can the Welsh NHS Confederation help you?

Please get in touch if you want further details on any of the issues raised in this briefing. We can also provide information and briefings ahead of Assembly debates on the key issues affecting the NHS.

For more information, please contact Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Policy and Public Affairs Manager: **Nesta.Lloyd-Jones@welshconfed.org**

You can visit our website at **www.welshconfed.org** or follow us on Twitter  **@WelshConfed**