

Everything affects health

An update to our briefing Mind the gap: what's
stopping change?

November 2022

Poverty causes ill health and illness

The Welsh NHS Confederation Health and Wellbeing Alliance, in partnership with the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), is calling on the Welsh Government to take cross-government action to tackle health inequalities. We need a cross-government delivery plan setting out what every department is doing to tackle poverty and health inequalities, how success will be measured and evaluated, and how Welsh organisations can collaborate to reduce ill health and tackle the cost-of-living crisis.

Health inequalities – unfair and avoidable differences in health and access to healthcare across the population, and between different groups within society – have long been an issue, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living has exacerbated them.

“The current cost of living crisis is not just a temporary economic squeeze: it is a long-term public health issue affecting the whole population.”

[Public Health Wales](#)

Over the coming months, this cost-of-living crisis is likely to worsen, leading to a rise in poverty and ill health, putting more people out of work and placing a greater strain on the NHS, social care, housing organisations and the third sector. The Welsh Government has admitted that we are facing ‘an emergency for the vulnerable in society’.

“Tackling poverty cannot be seen as a singular issue and that is why we take a government-wide, long-term approach in Wales.”

[Welsh Government](#)

We welcome the Welsh Government’s commitment to reducing inequalities across a range of policy areas, but we now urge ministers to establish a cross-government taskforce, led by the first minister, to drive change at scale and pace through a coordinated national action plan.

At a glance

- Over a third of children in Wales are now classed as living in poverty, more than anywhere else in the UK. ([Audit Wales](#))
- Between 2017–18 and 2019–20, nearly a quarter of the population (23%) of Wales were living in relative income poverty after housing costs. This is likely to rise. ([Welsh Government](#))
- Up to 45% of households in Wales are now likely to be struggling to keep warm and safe at home, [trapped in fuel poverty](#). Cold homes [can cause and worsen respiratory conditions](#), cardiovascular diseases, poor mental health, dementia, hypothermia and problems with childhood development.
- 74% of people in Wales feel increasingly worried about their ability to stay warm and healthy this winter and 70% are planning to use less heating in their home due to rising energy bills. 11% said they wouldn't heat their home as needed even if cold weather could make a member of their household unwell or an existing health condition worse. ([Royal College of Physicians](#))
- 43% of people in Wales have seen their mental health deteriorate as a result of their financial position, while 30% have seen a deterioration in their physical health. ([Bevan Foundation](#))

A healthy workforce means a healthy economy. With economic inactivity on the rise, we need to shift the focus from initiatives delivered through the NHS and local authorities to addressing factors such as poor housing, food quality, community safety, low incomes, fuel poverty, racism and discrimination, poor transport links and air pollution, and we need to do this in a nationally coordinated way, with detailed nationally-led implementation guidance to reduce local variation, the introduction of health impact assessments and shared performance measures, and investment in prevention at a local level.

“Cold and overcrowded homes, poor education, rising crime, lack of opportunity: these things can't be addressed via the health service. The NHS is just left dealing with the consequences – recurrent asthma attacks because a child is living in damp rental accommodation; depression in a 50-year-old factory worker who has lost his job due to osteoarthritis and with poor literacy skills is struggling to find new employment, so is falling into poverty and becoming desperate; recurrent falls in a frail older person without a care package. These are the things that medicine can't fix.”

GP, October 2022

In July 2022, we published [Mind the gap: what's stopping change?](#), which urged the Welsh Government to close the implementation gap on health and wellbeing for adults and children.

The government should:

1. consolidate commitments on reducing inequalities and map out existing activity on public health, inequalities, poverty reduction and social security in one delivery plan to improve accountability
2. provide more detailed national implementation guidance to local delivery bodies and introduce health impact assessment regulations as a priority
3. develop a shared set of performance measures focused on reducing inequalities and improve access to high-quality, robust data for evaluation
4. improve access to prevention programmes based in primary and community care, especially for those living in poverty, and invest in innovation, including screening programmes, vaccines and wearable technology
5. ensure that funding encourages collaboration and is linked to tackling inequalities and require regional partnership boards (RPBs) and public service boards (PSBs) to tackle inequalities.

Poverty is the single major challenge facing all tiers of government.

The impact of poverty is far reaching, with many damaging effects. It is multidimensional, complex, growing and impacting more people in Wales, [according to Audit Wales](#), which has also recommended a national approach with a suite of performance measures, targets for alleviating and tackling poverty and regular evaluation of performance and public reporting.

“The scale of the challenge and weaknesses in current work make it difficult for Welsh and local government to deliver the systemic change required to tackle and alleviate poverty. A revised national strategy would enable the Welsh Government to articulate an up-to-date vision, direct delivery to support objectives and put in place appropriate measures to judge impact. A refreshed national strategy would help set a strategic vision with expectations and ambitions for the whole public sector to achieve collectively.”

Audit Wales

The stories behind the stats

In this briefing, we have collected stories which describe how organisations from across Wales are working to reduce poverty, ill health and inequalities by breaking down barriers across health, social services, housing, benefits and welfare advice, transport, loneliness and isolation, climate change, air pollution and much more. Read on to learn about the stories behind the stats.

Cross-sector working in action: how organisations across Wales are working to reduce poverty, ill health and inequalities.

This set of case studies describes how organisations across Wales are working across borders and boundaries to help the most vulnerable people in our society. This cross-sector working should be supported and encouraged by the Welsh Government with a cross-government action plan.

“Expertise [in improving population health] lies across a range of people – especially the lived experience of communities, powerful insights of the voluntary sector, the technical skill of public health teams, and insights from data and intelligence teams across a range of partner organisations.”

[The King's Fund](#)

Housing and health

A [Bevan exemplar project based in Hywel Dda University Health Board](#) is developing an online health board resource with housing information, cross-sector referral pathways and bespoke performance management tools. The aim is to work with colleagues across Wales to share learning and good practice, leading to a national good practice guide on health and housing.

Employment rights and welfare benefits

The [Pontio project](#) offers befriending and one-to-one support to people living with and affected by multiple sclerosis (MS) in Wales. This includes advice on employment rights and welfare benefits, including Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claims, ways to manage MS and how to access treatments, health, social care services and housing.

Exercise and health

Access to outside space is crucial for good health. The [parkrun practice initiative](#) aims to raise awareness of parkrun among GPs and practice staff, encourage them to take part in parkrun and signpost patients/carers to parkrun events, support the growth of social prescribing and help build integrated and supportive local communities centred on wellness. The Cardiff Bay and Llansamlet [Run Talk Run](#) groups promote running and talking as a way of supporting mental health.

Post-pandemic support for vulnerable people

[Back to Community Life](#) from Improvement Cymru supports people who are struggling to leave their home and get back to community life since the pandemic. These include people with dementia, people previously shielding or people who are vulnerable. The initiative began in Mountain Ash and has been created in partnership with local people, the police, local volunteer agency, local transport, local authority, third sector, health and social care, shops and businesses, with information provided to local shops and amenities to help them support people.

The role of leisure and culture in wellbeing

The Welsh NHS Confederation and [Community Leisure UK \(Wales\)](#) have highlighted the contribution of charitable trusts to the health and wellbeing of people in Wales through a collection of case studies, including the Escape Pain programme in Cardiff, reminiscence therapy in care homes in Bridgend, yoga for women struggling with menopause in Swansea, and a reading project in Flintshire.

Financial advice for people with sight loss

[RNIB Cymru's](#) advice line supports blind and partially sighted people to claim the benefits to which they're entitled. Welfare benefit advisers carry out a full benefit check and support people with sight loss to claim the benefits they may be missing out on. Advisers also help blind and partially sighted people to challenge a benefit decision if it's felt they should be awarded more. RNIB Cymru has also published [information](#) around benefits rights, the blind person's tax allowance and pension credit. They have created new [factsheets](#) about help with energy bills and about cost of living support grants.

Fighting fuel and food poverty

Through tenant support teams, housing associations distribute food bank vouchers to those in need. Additionally, many [Community Housing Cymru](#) members support food banks with monetary donations. [Newydd Housing Association](#) is piloting a project that aims to make food affordable and accessible for all homes across the Vale area. [Cartrefi Conwy](#) is working to encourage healthy eating, food growing and cooking by delivering cooking education sessions. [Adra](#) supports the Bwyd café, which coordinates foodbank distribution in Bangor and distributes waste food from supermarkets. [Grŵp Cynefin](#), [Adra](#) and [Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn](#) have jointly funded 'energy wardens' to provide tenants with advice on switching energy suppliers and tariffs. This joint initiative has led to around £140,000 of savings and support, demonstrating the merit of pooling resources for maximum impact.

The holistic needs of cancer patients

Tenovus Cancer Care provides benefits advice to people affected by cancer and has seen an increase in patient referrals for both financial advice and their counselling service. Around 40% of those people have received a terminal cancer diagnosis. In response to inequalities of lung cancer incidence, survival and mortality, the charity has published [Tackling inequalities: lung cancer](#), calling for leadership and investment in lung cancer screening, improved signposting to stop smoking, and targeting efforts at those areas and communities with greatest need.

Peer support in women's health

Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales (FTWW) provides peer support and advocacy for women and people assigned female at birth who are disabled and/or living with long-term health issues. Many members of the charity's online community are experiencing escalating financial hardship and deteriorating wellbeing. FTWW helps them get involved in projects like [Women's Health Wales](#) – FTWW, which increases confidence, reduces isolation and addresses historical health inequalities.

Arts and health

The [Cultural Cwtsh](#), funded by the Arts Council of Wales, is a suite of fun and stimulating online resources made by artists to support the healthcare workforce in Wales as they look to recover from the intense pressures of working throughout a pandemic. [The Welsh NHS Confederation is working with the Arts Council for Wales](#) to improve wellbeing among health and care staff. The Wales Arts Health and Well-being Network (WAHWN) has made a wide variety of [case studies](#) available, including [cARTrefu](#) which supports the wellbeing of care home residents through creative activity.

Underrepresented voices

Public Health Wales, the future generations commissioner for Wales and Futures Literacy researchers (FLiNT) have worked with Wales' most underrepresented communities to create a [climate and nature emergency policy](#). Using creative character-led storytelling activities, workshops and storytelling competitions, participants were asked to share what the future of Wales with climate change looks and feels like for them. It revealed the interconnected way participants viewed the climate and nature emergencies alongside their local environment and access to green space. Many also shared their concern of being left behind by transport inequalities.

Cost of living information hub

Powys County Council has launched an [information hub](#) with advice and support about dealing with the cost of living. The council has worked with local partner organisations to pull together a wide range of information in one place to ensure people know what help is already available and how to access it. The council is also creating a network of warm spaces across Powys.

Supporting people living with a learning disability

A team made up of staff from Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) and Flintshire County Council has launched a new initiative in Flintshire to [support people with a learning disability](#), living in their own homes, who need medication administering via a gastrostomy feeding tube. The initiative supports education and training for care staff to administer medication safely and effectively via gastrostomy tubes. This helps people live more independently at home and imposes less restrictions, providing an improved quality of life and giving nurses time to see more patients. The team is sharing the results of the initiative to promote the model of care with the aim of implementing it across north Wales.

Here to help campaign

The Welsh Government is working with public sector partners to share key messages around the cost-of-living support available to people in Wales through the 'Here to help' campaign. The campaign includes information on how to access support and from whom, and how people can help others in their community to access support available in areas such as childcare expenses, finances, electricity bills and school meals.

Poverty, housing and health in older people

'Hospital to a healthier home' services support the NHS and social services by addressing home safety risks, barriers to independent living, and fuel poverty. Funded by Care and Repair Cymru, these services support older people living with sensory loss and/or dementia, and stroke survivors; support older and vulnerable people on issues such as fuel poverty, energy efficiency and the warm homes agenda; and collaborate on campaigns around falls prevention and winter preparedness.

Supporting older people to live well

Age Connects organisations across Wales operate and fund a wide variety of projects designed to reduce the inequalities that affect older people, including 'vaxi taxi' services to get older people to COVID-19 vaccination appointments, advice and advocacy on welfare benefits, social care funding and fuel poverty, day centres, support workers and community outreach for those affected by dementia, befriending and volunteering schemes, nail-cutting and podiatry services.

Cynon Linc community hub

Cynon Linc is a vibrant community hub in the heart of the Cynon Valley. Formerly a council-run older people's day care centre, Age Connects Morgannwg took over the building as an asset transfer in 2018 and secured £2.8 million of funding to transform the centre into a multi-generational, integrated hub operating as a social enterprise and raising money through rent, room hire, restaurant sales, events and fundraising. There's a GP practice, mental health support, homelessness support, information hub, social enterprise café, pre-school childcare, youth club, fitness and wellbeing classes and social groups for carers, along with a large function hall for events, parties and conferences.

About the Welsh NHS Confederation Health and Wellbeing Alliance

Health is not a standalone issue.

We all need to play our part in developing a health service that is fit for the future. The Welsh NHS Confederation Health and Wellbeing Alliance consists of over 70 health and care organisations from royal colleges, third sector organisations and social care organisations, and was established in 2015.

Convened by the Welsh NHS Confederation, and previously known as the Policy Forum, we developed recommendations in the run-up to the 2016 and [2021 Senedd elections](#). In April 2021, we published [Making the difference](#), which called on the next Welsh Government to:

- publish an ambitious cross-government strategy to tackle inequalities
- invest in long-term prevention across all sectors
- work in partnership with people and communities to change lives for the better.

This paper followed an open letter to the First Minister and Senedd opposition party leaders in February 2021, calling for a cross-government strategy on health inequalities.

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