



PUBLIC HEALTH NETWORK CYMRU

— E-BULLETIN —

NOVEMBER 2023

CHILDREN AND THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS IN WALES





WELCOME

Welcome to Novembers e-bulletin which shares a range of articles which highlight national, regional or local initiatives, policies or programmes which aim to support children and their families through the cost of living crisis.

We recently held a webinar on this topic which can be viewed on the past events page of our [website](#).

The cost of living crisis is having, and will continue to have, wide-ranging and long-term impacts on the day-to-day lives of people in Wales, but with specific impacts on children. These impacts are of particular concern given how experiences of poverty in childhood have long-lasting negative effects on their development and future health and prosperity. Tackling child poverty is at the heart of securing a better and more resilient future for Wales and is a priority for tackling inequalities.

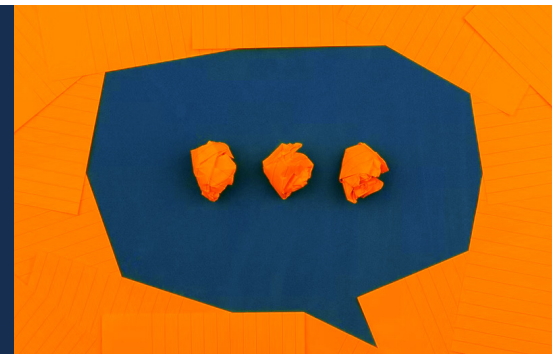
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POLICY

Giving Every Child in Wales the Best Start in Life

Manon Roberts, Senior Policy Officer, Public Health Wales
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Llywio, dylanwadu ar a chydweithio ar gyfer iechyd y cyhoedd yng Nghymru
 Informing, influencing and collaborating for public health in Wales

Ensuring every child has the best start in life is a core foundation for building a healthier and more equal future for Wales and is a priority for tackling inequalities. But poverty and the compounding impacts of the cost of living crisis are threatening children’s development now and their outcomes in later life. Public Health Wales has been looking into the impacts of the cost of living crisis on children in Wales and potential priority policy responses.

There is very strong evidence that the first 1000 days (from pregnancy to a child’s second birthday) represents a critical developmental period, where we see the most rapid phase of brain growth and development and where the foundations for future health, well-being and prosperity are built.

income and welfare payments interact with a high prevalence of insecure, low-paid work, and high childcare costs, all of which increase the risk that even children living in working households experience poverty. Stigma acts as a crucial barrier to support, particularly take-up of benefits and support schemes such as free school meals, with negative knock-on effects on children’s health and well-being.

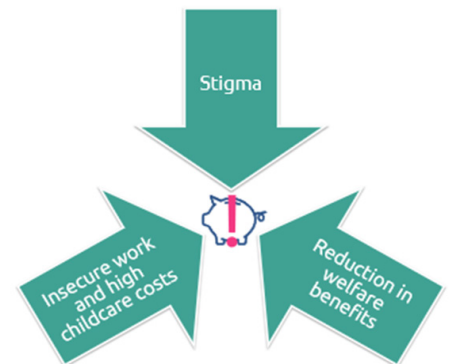
Why are children particularly at risk?

Children have the highest risk of poverty of all age groups in Wales: nearly one in three (28%) children in Wales are living in relative income poverty. Children in larger, lone-parent and workless families are at particularly high risk.

What has contributed to children’s higher risk of poverty?

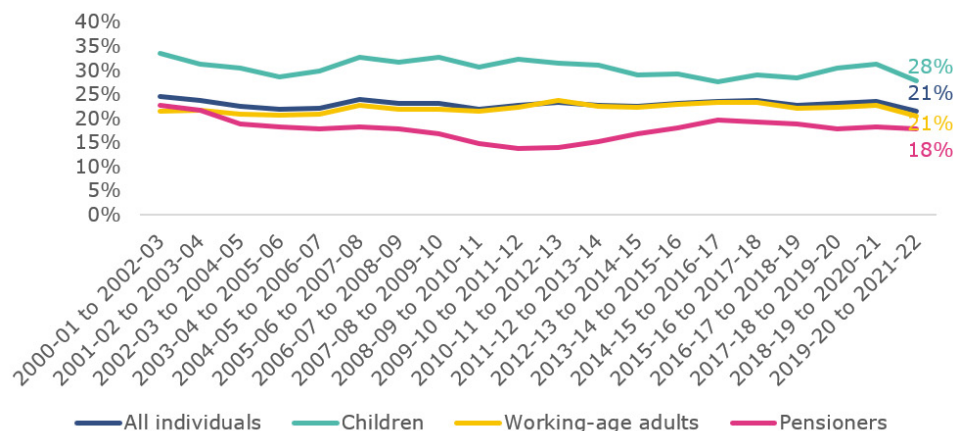
The cost of living crisis has followed a sustained reduction in welfare benefits available to families with children since 2010. Changes have included the two-child limit and the benefit cap, disproportionately affecting children living in the least well-off areas.

How is the cost of living crisis impacting the health and well-being of children in Wales?

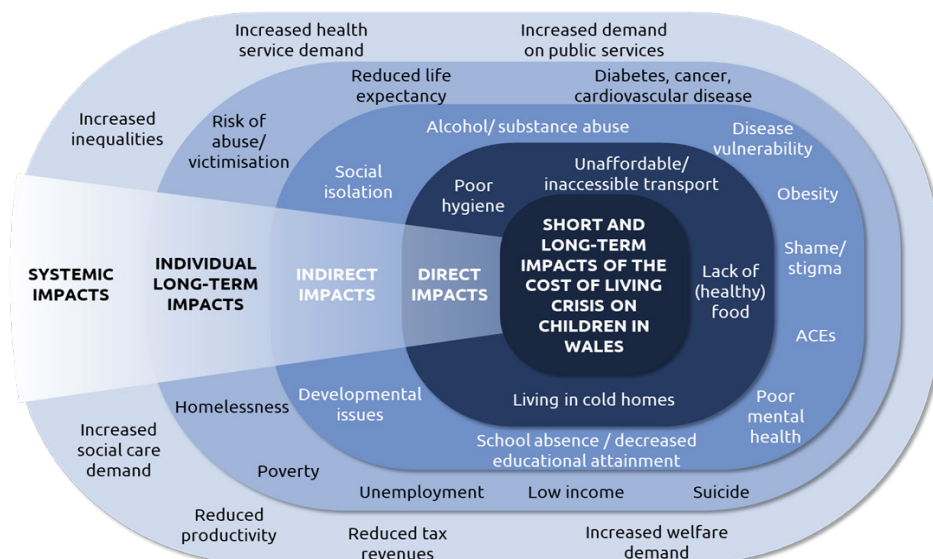


Not having enough money for the essentials needed for a healthy life can affect different aspects of the lives of children and their families, in direct and indirect ways.

Real-term cuts to family



For example, not being able to afford to put the heating on, or of not being able to afford enough nutritious food puts children at a higher risk of asthma, due to living in a cold, damp home, or obesity, due to eating less nutritious food that is more filling and cheaper per calorie. The cost of living crisis is also increasing the risk of hygiene poverty, with almost 1 in 3 (29%) respondents to a national survey in Wales cutting back on hot showers/baths and laundry due to increasing costs. This has significant implications for children’s mental health.



We can expect negative physical and mental health outcomes in childhood driven by the cost of living crisis to continue even after the economic crisis has abated. For example, decreased school attendance and attainment can result in difficulties in finding work in the longer term, especially secure and well-paid work. This can cause an accumulation of disadvantage across the life-course and trap people in poverty, including future generations.

It is therefore likely that, by increasing child poverty and the long-term negative impacts on health that result, the cost of living crisis will:

1. decrease the life expectancy of children growing up in the worst off areas of Wales over their life-course;
2. further entrench existing inequalities in health between these worst off children and those living in better off areas of Wales; and
3. trap some children and families in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage, across generations.

What needs to be done?

Clear strategic leadership is

required to tackle the underlying causes of stubbornly high rates of child poverty in Wales and the health inequalities that result from it. Public Health Wales’s analysis highlights eleven priority policy action areas, which include providing financial support for children and families, improving parental employment and income, reducing the cost of school attendance and reducing stigma and shame around poverty.

As we argued in our previous report, which looked at the public health impacts of the cost of living crisis across the population, there are a number of key principles that should underpin a public health approach to the crisis. These

include putting social justice, health and sustainability at the heart of all policies, with an overriding priority of giving every child the best start in life, recognising that disadvantage can start before birth and accumulate over the life-course.

Whilst there is considerable finance pressure on government and public services in Wales, these principles will help ensure that the health and well-being of children is protected during this time of crisis while also setting a course for a healthier and more equal future for Wales.

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PRACTICE

Making Difficult Choices: the impact of food poverty on children's weight from a PIPYN perspective

Chris Ewing, Senior Health Improvement Practitioner (PIPYN), Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board



Today, in our era of spectacular technological advances and applauded human capabilities, parents the length and breadth of the UK will be forced into making difficult choices around the health of their children. They will make choices around the foods that they purchase and cook for their children, hoping to provide them with the nutrition and sustenance required of growing humans. But for the many families on Anglesey living in poverty, do they really have choice?

Choice is a concept of privilege, but families living in poverty do not possess such privilege when it comes to food choice – whether because of reliance on the offerings of local foodbanks or the limitations of weekly budgets – very often the only choice open to them is the very cheapest of foodstuffs, which in turn is very often of poorest nutritional value. This lack of choice around food can result in significant distress for families, with an increased risk of unintentional neglect as identified in the Children in Wales report on the 7th annual Child & Family Poverty surveys (2023) which states: “Being in poverty itself, doesn’t make people bad parents.” (1)

PIPYN (Pwysau Iach Plant Yng Nghymru) is a pilot programme

delivering support to families in Anglesey, Merthyr and Cardiff under the Welsh Government’s 10 year strategy ‘Healthy Weight Healthy Wales’. The programme adopts a multi-level whole system approach to obesity prevention in our local communities and strives to offer direct support to families where there is a child identified as being above a healthy weight. The Programme faces challenges, as they are doing this under the constraints of a very real cost of living crisis.

The work of PIPYN is underpinned by the evidence that providing children with a healthy, balanced diet and opportunity to access physical activity is key to supporting healthy weight now and into their futures. Although it is important to recognise the



challenge that many families are living in poverty. Our work with families shows overwhelmingly that many parents know **what** to do in order to support their children to maintain a healthy weight, but with the increasing financial pressures on them, they struggle to know **how** to achieve this. The ability to choose what to feed their children has been largely

stripped from their grasp, leaving them with very limited choices. Parents in our local communities commonly set the PIPYN team a significant challenge: how to feed their children well on a tight budget.

Consider this: you meet a lone parent of three children under the age of ten. They tell you that their weekly budget has been decimated by the unexpected rise in energy costs to heat the home, leaving just £5 to purchase food for the weekend. The parent tells you that they want the very best for their children, they want them to have wholesome, nutritious foods but they also want to fill their bellies. They want them to go to bed without the hunger pangs that the parent often feels. Faced with this, what might you advise this parent? In



reality, how much choice does this afford the parent? Should they buy those crisp, healthy apples, perhaps with some fresh, tasty strawberries, or should they buy the value packs of frozen chicken nuggets and chips, maybe stretch to that £1 large frozen pizza? How much choice does this parent actually have?

The PIPYN team on Anglesey are frequently challenged by parents who are looking for support and solutions on how to do it all on a shoestring. They hear all the health messages loud and clear: to eat more fruits and vegetables, to cook from fresh, to limit unhealthy snacks. The guilt felt when parents feel unable to meet these objectives due to poverty is palpable to those of us working with families.

At PIPYN, we believe that empowering parents to retain some semblance of healthy choice is paramount to the future health of our child

Methods currently being explored and tested are:

- Supporting local food-sharing initiatives to provide nutritionally balanced food packages and recipes
- Supporting local foodbanks to provide families with a range of options for food parcel contents, reflective of choices made using a meal planning tool, rather than contents being chosen on their behalf;
- Offering community-based ‘Eat Smart, Save Better’ sessions within local primary schools and in conjunction with community partners such as Menter Môn, Tai Môn and FFIWS.

vegetables and fruits;

- Using low-energy cooking methods;
- Promoting the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers; and
- Promoting the uptake of the universal free school meals offer.

Through working in partnership with others, it is PIPYN’s intention to empower families through the support we offer and to create opportunities that restore a sense of choice and dignity to the families we work with, a true choice that supports children to be a healthy weight regardless of financial status. Choice must mean choice, not Hobson’s Choice.

[\(1\) CiW_Child_Family_Poverty_Report_2023_English.pdf \(childreninwales.org.uk\)](https://childreninwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CiW-Child-Family-Poverty-Report-2023-English.pdf)



These sessions are informal workshops that are open to all, looking at the EatWell Guide and offering easy hacks for eating healthily on a budget including:

- Checking kitchen stock before going shopping so as not to duplicate;
- Planning meals for the week ahead and shopping specifically for that meal

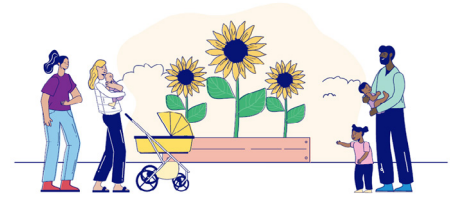
population, both physical health and mental health. Striving to find innovative ways of re-introducing choice through practical support and system interventions is key.

- plan;
- How to deal with ‘pester power’ while shopping;
- Using own-brand foodstuffs rather than high-brand items;
- Using tinned and frozen

POLICY

What can we do to help all children in Wales get the best start in life

Sue Wing, Principal Public Health Practitioner, Public Health Wales



Creating the conditions for families to flourish is the key to giving every child in Wales the best start in life. This was the finding of recent work by Public Health Wales' First 1000 Days programme to describe a public health approach to supporting parents.

A good start in life is important because early experiences can shape babies' whole lives. Babies' brains are built during pregnancy and their earliest years. This is when the foundations are laid for the social and emotional skills that they will use to make friends, build relationships, and explore their world. A good start gives children a solid foundation to build on. This means they can make the most of opportunities to learn and develop. If babies don't get a good start, it is harder for them to catch up as they get older.

Everyone in society benefits when children grow up happy and healthy, when they are able to do well at school, find rewarding work and build their own family and community.

For the best start in life babies need to feel safe, loved and have lots of opportunities to engage with people and explore their world. They need care and attention from the most important people in their lives. Talking, playing and responding to babies builds their brains.

Parents want the best for

their children but parenting is not easy and sometimes the circumstances in which families live can make it much harder. It is difficult to find time, energy and patience if you are worrying about making ends meet, or if you are struggling with health, housing or relationship issues.

There are some fundamental building blocks that we all need for a happy and healthy life. We need good places to live and work, a safe warm home, to be part of a community with enough money to live on and easy access to support when it is needed. Too many families have gaps in these building blocks and that makes it harder for them to give their baby the best start in life. Families with young children are particularly vulnerable when times are tough and the cost of living crisis has hit some families hard. Maternity leave and the need for childcare can limit income and families often have to spend more on essentials such as food and energy bills.

The First 1000 Days programme has brought together research evidence and insight into the experience of parents to describe a public health approach to supporting parents. The work highlighted the importance of the context in which families live and the buffering role of parent's mental wellbeing and support networks. Good mental wellbeing and social support helps parents to manage challenges and that can minimise the impact of challenges on their children.

Amy McNaughton, Consultant in Public Health at Public Health Wales, said:

"Giving babies the best start in life requires us to create the conditions for families to flourish. Parenting is not easy and it is harder if you don't have the things you need and are constantly worrying about making ends meet. There are unfair differences in the resources and support that parents have and the circumstances they face. Parenting knowledge and skills play a part but, to support parents to give their child the best start in life, more needs to be done."

Small changes can make a big difference. It is important to focus on addressing child poverty, improving living and working conditions and making sure families have easy access to support when they need it. If more parents have the building blocks for a happy, healthy life in place, more babies will have the love, care and attention that gives them the best start in life.

The First 1000 Days programme has recently published a short animation to help all of us think about our role in helping families to thrive and babies get the best start in life. A technical and summary report setting out how a Public Health Approach to Supporting Parents was developed is also available via [this link](#).

The Grapevine

POLICY | RESEARCH

Building public support for healthy eating policies: four evidence-based tips

Jonathan Bone, mission manager for a healthy life at Nesta Cymru

If you're working in public health communications you will have no doubt experienced challenges and confusion around policies and messages that fail to cut through with the public.

When we hear about a new proposal, there are lots of things we might consider – whether it sounds effective, whether it sounds fair, or whether there are downsides. The constant barrage of messages from the media, politicians and our peers can make it difficult for the public to understand the objectives and potential benefits of health policies.

Ultimately, governments care what the public think, and if it is not clear that a policy has widespread support, it is more vulnerable to being delayed or abandoned. This means some promising proposals aimed at improving people's diets – such as a pre-watershed ban on adverts for foods high in fat, salt and sugar – have been delayed following industry lobbying.

What shapes public approval of health policies?

To try and cut through this noise, Nesta and the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) conducted a [randomised control trial \(RCT\)](#) with nearly 9000 Welsh participants to measure how

much being told about different rationales and/or potential benefits of a series of healthy eating policies influenced public approval.

We found that the very same health policy can yield different levels of support depending on how it is explained and presented. Based on our research, here are four key principles to better understand and engage with the public's concerns, values and priorities – giving the best possible chance for policies to be supported by the public.

Don't just say what a policy is, explain why it is important

While it may seem convenient to apply a one-size-fits-all approach, different messages worked better for different policies. Messages can be tailored to explain rationale, benefits, or to counter opposition arguments to specific policies.

When tailoring individual messaging for policies isn't practical, focus on common concerns and priorities

When you need to talk about multiple policies, concentrate on shared concerns that consistently matter to people, such as improving children's health or empowering consumers.

Build evidence-based policies that the public support, instead of trying to build support later

Policymakers should consider what the public wants, alongside what experts say, from the beginning of the policy design process eg, through citizen advisory committees, public consultations or by running a citizens' assembly.

Conduct your own research.

To really understand what kind of messaging is going to work best for your policy and your public, we recommend conducting your own research - through running a randomised control trial, focus groups, surveys, or even listening to what is being discussed on social media.

Nesta and BIT's recent study, alongside the collective work of other researchers, has shown that we must not underestimate the power of communication when developing policies that aim to make healthy eating the easy choice.

Find out more detail for each of these tips at: [Building public support for healthy eating policies: four evidence-based tips | Nesta](#)

Videos



Protecting health and wellbeing in the climate crisis

This conference supported people who work with Public Service Boards (PSBs) or Public Bodies who are planning or starting their local climate risk assessments. The conference included an introduction to the guidance on local climate risk assessments being produced by Natural Resources Wales for PSBs. Attendees heard key insights from the recent Health Impact Assessment...

[Watch](#)



Tackling the public health effects of climate change – find out how you and your team can take action

This webinar introduced a free online resource that helps individuals and teams to take action to reduce their environmental impact.

[Watch](#)



Children and the cost of living crisis in Wales

This webinar explored current policy, research and practice in Wales which aims to support children and their families through the cost of living crisis.

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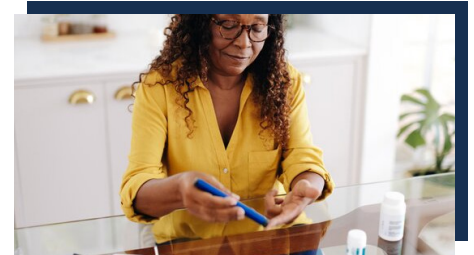
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A LOOK BACK AT 2023

