

Working together for a healthier Wales: Why It Matters

Longer, healthier lives and a fairer, more prosperous Wales - why better health strengthens fairness, wellbeing, and prosperity.



Longer and healthier lives, a more prosperous and fairer Wales

Why we need policy action

Good health is a fundamental human right and starts with the basics

This includes safe homes, secure work, access to services, affordable healthy food, and clean air in health-promoting neighbourhoods.

When these building blocks of health are missing, lives are cut short. Also, we see unfair and avoidable differences in health between people and communities and in the average number of years an individual is expected to live in good health, or 'healthy life expectancy'. Some of these differences are based on the level of deprivation in the area where we live.

- In Wales, when comparing the most deprived areas with the least deprived, there is a 20-year gap in healthy life expectancy among women ([ONS 2025](#)).
- There are almost three times more avoidable deaths for men and women ([ONS 2025](#)) and a death rate that is 70% higher for children ([RCPCCH 2020](#)) in our most, compared with least, deprived areas.

Unfair differences in health are costly

They place unsustainable demand and costs on already overstretched services including our health service. They also lead to lost productivity and reduced economic output. But these differences are avoidable, which means we can change them and make a difference. To do this requires a shift to prevention.

Prevention pays and it costs less than treatment

Investing in prevention will help prevent ill health happening or getting worse, so that people enjoy longer and healthier lives. It will also reduce the burden and cost of ill health when it does happen and the unfair differences in health between people and communities. Prioritising prevention is a route to a sustainable health and care system that is available to those who need it when they need it, now and for future generations. Prevention will also be good for economic growth; healthier people create stronger communities and a thriving economy, helping to build a resilient and prosperous Wales.

- Every one pound invested in high-quality, upstream prevention can return £14 ([Masters et al 2017](#)).

5 prevention-focused policy actions will strengthen the building blocks of health and wellbeing throughout life

The best start in life builds lifelong health and wellbeing

The foundations of health throughout our lives are built in pregnancy and childhood

Sadly, many children live through harmful experiences that have profound consequences to their health and wellbeing. Children growing up in poverty lack essentials to satisfy their basic needs, such as a warm safe home and healthy food, and often fall behind in their learning, work prospects and health. ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).

Poverty also creates stress in the family environment that can cause parental conflict and difficulties with parenting, which can negatively affect children's outcomes and life chances ([Early Intervention Foundation, 2021](#)).

Furthermore, when a child experiences direct harm (e.g. sexual or physical abuse) or experiences that affect the environment in which they live (e.g. growing up in a household with domestic violence) - known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – they are at a higher risk of adopting health-harming behaviours and developing ill health in adulthood and of increased use of primary and hospital care ([Public Health Wales 2016](#), [Public Health Wales 2016](#)).

Despite the importance of the early years for life-long health, in Wales many families are missing out on vital support that helps their children grow and develop well. This includes almost a fifth (18%) of Healthy Child Wales Programme contacts recorded as not having taken place, being due to a child not having been brought to an appointment ([Welsh Government 2025](#)).

Data in Wales

- One in four (24%) children are living in poverty ([Public Health Wales 2025](#))¹.
- In 2021, the estimated annual financial costs to society linked to the health impacts of ACEs were £2.2billion, including £118million for alcohol use, £17million for violence and £476million for cancer ([Public Health Wales 2021](#)).



Public views in Wales

80% agree or strongly agree that the circumstances that children are born into determine their opportunities for good health throughout life ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).



Why policy action can make a real difference

Policies that ensure a healthy, safe and nurturing childhood protect and improve the health and wellbeing of babies, children and young people, enabling them to achieve their potential and thrive through life.

- Every £1 invested in early childhood development interventions returns £1.30-£16.80 ([Public Health Wales 2016](#), [World Health Organization 2015](#)).
- A 10% reduction in the prevalence of ACEs in Wales would reduce their combined annual cost by 7%, saving £161million a year ([Public Health Wales 2021](#)).

¹ This figure is before housing costs are accounted for; adding housing costs brings even more children into poverty.



Financial wellbeing drives better health and a prosperous economy

Fair, rewarding and secure work can protect health, reduce psychological stress, create a route out of poverty and support families to give children the best start in life

For those who are in work, many will spend a significant proportion - on average, a third - of their waking hours in the workplace during their lifetime ([UK Health Security Agency 2016](#)), so it is essential that our places of work promote good health and wellbeing.

The health and wellbeing of those who are not in work is also important. In the UK, there has been a rise in the number of people who are out of the labour market due to ill-health ([ONS 2022](#)).

As well as consequences for people and their families, an increase in poor health and economic inactivity restricts labour supply and economic growth ([The Health Foundation 2022](#)). It also costs financially; the cost of economic inactivity due to sickness absence and other ill health in Wales is estimated to be £18.9billion (Public Health Wales, not yet published).

Data in Wales

- 24% of adults (16-64 years) are economically inactive², which is higher than the UK rate (22%), and the most common cause of economic inactivity in the year ending March 2025 was long-term sickness (36% males, 32% females) ([Welsh Government 2025](#)).
- Wales has higher sickness absence rates than the UK average, and 7.2 million days were lost through sickness absence in 2024; on average, 5 days lost per worker ([ONS 2025](#)).



² Economically inactive people are those without a job who have not actively sought work in the last four weeks, and/or are not available to start work in the next two weeks ([Welsh Government 2025](#)).

Data in Wales

- Over one in four (27%) in paid employment experienced moderate to high levels of precarious working before the Covid-19 pandemic (February 2020), with those reporting poorer health more likely to be in precarious employment than those reporting better health ([Gray et al 2022](#)).
- In 2024, approximately 16% of employee jobs were paid below the Living Wage ([ONS 2024](#), [Living Wage Foundation 2025](#)).



Public views in Wales

When asked to look back through their lives, 85% said that their financial position and 77% said the jobs they have had were very or somewhat important in shaping their current health ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)). Also, 87% agree or strongly agree that employers should do more to look after their workers' health ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).



Why policy action can make a real difference

Policies that help people get into jobs, ensure fair work and reward for all, and promote workplace health enable people to access the things that keep them well and increase the financial stability of individuals and families.

- With a diverse, healthy and engaged workforce, businesses and organisations can be more productive, contributing to a vibrant and sustainable economy ([Public Health Wales 2022](#)).
- Investment in employee mental health can return £5 per every £1 invested ([Deloitte 2020](#)) and the promotion of wellbeing in the workplace can have a substantial annual return on investment of more than 9 to 1 ([London School of Economics and Political Science 2011](#)).

Healthy lives start in our everyday places

Our health is shaped by the places where we live, learn, work, shop and play. But too often, poor quality environments damage our health and cut lives short, through poor housing conditions and environments that promote unhealthy diets and smoking.

As the place where we often spend most of our time, our homes should protect and promote our health and wellbeing. But Wales has some of the oldest and least energy efficient housing in Europe, pushing many into fuel poverty and ill health. Unaffordable and poor-quality housing often leads to financial stress, mental ill health and risk of sickness including heart attacks, stroke, and arthritic and respiratory conditions.

Data in Wales

- In 2017-18, 18% of homes posed a serious or immediate risk to health and safety³ ([Welsh Government 2020](#)).
- In 2023, approximately two-thirds (67%) reported being stressed or anxious about the cost of heating their home ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)) and more than six in ten (61%) said energy costs were a financial concern in their household ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).
- The full cost to society of leaving people in unhealthy housing, estimated in 2019, was £1 billion⁴ ([Public Health Wales 2019](#)).



Public views in Wales

Housing and health

People recognise the importance of housing for health. They identify that priority areas for action in Wales are the affordability (84%), quality (80%) and security (44%) of homes ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).



The food we eat in and out of the home should be nutritious and help us maintain a healthy weight. But changing dietary patterns in Wales and elsewhere have seen more people eating outside the home and a higher reliance on convenience food, which can cause obesity ([Public Health Wales 2018](#)).

The number of people with obesity in Wales is high and rising, as are the healthcare costs associated with managing its health effects such as long-term diseases including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer ([Public Health Wales no date](#)).

Data in Wales

- In 2024/25, 33% of adults said they ate five or more portions of fruit and vegetables the previous day and, based on self-reported weight and height, 36% of people were a healthy weight and 62% were overweight or obese ([Welsh Government 2025](#)).
- In 2024, the proportion of children aged 4-5 years living with overweight was 14% and a further 12% with obesity, with children residing in the most deprived areas more likely to be living with overweight or obesity ([Public Health Wales 2025](#)).
- The estimated cost of overweight and obesity in 2024 was £2.5 billion ([Public Health Wales 2025](#)).



Public views in Wales

Food and health

Having 'too many temptations' has been reported as the biggest barrier to taking action on weight (29%) ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)).



When our environments are health-promoting, they encourage uptake of healthier behaviours. But in Wales, smoking remains the leading cause of preventable ill health and death ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)), and there is more to do to reach the target of a smoking population of less than 5% by 2030.

³ Based on the total number of dwellings with any Category 1 Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) hazard.

⁴ Scaled to 2025 inflation with [Bank of England inflation calculator](#).

Data in Wales

- In 2024/25, 10% of adults said they were smoking ([Welsh Government 2025](#)).
- In 2023, over a quarter (26%) of children aged 11-16 years had tried e-cigarettes/vaping ([Public Health Wales 2025](#)).
- There were an estimated 3,845 deaths amongst those aged 35 and over and more than 17,000 hospital admissions per year attributable to smoking over the period 2020-22 ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)).



Public views in Wales

Smoking, vapes and health

There is majority support for restricting smoking in outdoor settings ([Public Health Wales 2022](#)) and a widespread view that government action is needed to reduce vaping in children and young people (92%) ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).

There is also public support for bans on the sale and import of disposable vapes (80%) and the advertising and promotion of e-cigarettes at point of sale (80%) ([ASH Wales 2024](#)) and for retailer licences that can be removed if they sell to underage smokers (91%) ([Smoking in Wales 2025](#)).



Why policy action can make a real difference

Policies that support healthy places make it easier for people to access and enjoy the things that help us live well, particularly for children and young people who are more susceptible to life-long poorer health due to the conditions of their living environments.

- Every £1 spent on home insulation programmes can return £1.87, and every £1 on improving warmth in vulnerable households gives £4 benefits and 39% fewer hospital admissions for cardiorespiratory conditions and injuries in those with upgraded houses ([Public Health Wales 2019](#)).
- Without policy actions taken to date there would be an additional approximately 170,000 smokers today in Wales (Public Health Wales, unpublished)⁵.

⁵ Public Health Wales using 2014 and 2024 ONS data.

Care tailored to local need builds health and resilience

Primary and community care is the first point of call for most people who use health services. It helps to meet the health needs of communities, while providing person-centred care.

Strong and resilient primary and community care is crucial for the sustainability of healthcare systems. But in Wales, our primary and community care system faces numerous challenges, including shifting patient expectations for delivery of care, increasing inequalities and deprivation leading to poorer health, an ageing population with more complex and long-term health conditions that are often preventable, and workforce and infrastructure pressures.

Data in Wales

- In the next ten-year period (2023/24 to 2033/34), rates of long-term illness are projected to increase including for heart failure (by 46%) and diabetes (by 22%); for diabetes, this represents an increase of 50,000 cases ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)).
- Rates of people with four or more health conditions are expected to almost double by 2035 ([Welsh Government 2023](#)).
- People living in the most deprived areas experience the worst health outcomes, including deaths from cancer which in 2024 was 52% higher in the most deprived areas compared with the least deprived ([Public Health Wales 2025](#)).



Public views in Wales

80% recognise that primary care services have a role to support everyone to experience good health and reduce unfair differences in health ([Public Health Wales 2025](#)).



Why policy action can make a real difference

Policies that bring together and coordinate primary and community care with other public services and the third sector support the delivery of care that meets the health, social, and economic needs of the whole person, tailored to local need when and where people need it. Coordination between professionals and services can be facilitated by the development of the workforce and integration of digital and data systems, helping embed a holistic approach to prevention ([Public Health Wales 2023](#)).

- Volunteer delivered debt advice services in a GP surgery can return between £2.60 to £4.41 for every £1 invested ([Public Health England 2017](#)).
- Training healthcare professionals, via clinical champions, to provide physical activity brief advice can provide an estimated return of £23.70 per £1 spent ([NHS Confederation 2024](#)).



A healthy planet protects our people now and in the future

The changing climate is one of the biggest health threats facing Wales now and in future

Climate change is already happening in Wales and affects us all, including effects on poor air quality, flooding and extreme weather. Impacts on people include reduced availability of resources like food and water, increased costs of basic needs like healthy food and heating, and disruption to the maintenance of infrastructure and access to services. These can lead to poorer mental health and wellbeing, increased rates of vector-borne⁶ and infectious diseases, long-term conditions like heart disease and cancer, heat-related illness and death ([Public Health Wales 2023](#), [World Health Organisation 2023](#)).

The result is extra pressure on services including our health service and a worsening of unfair differences in health due to the effects of climate change being disproportionately felt among vulnerable people who are least able to respond and recover. At a UK level, the projected financial cost of climate change damages to human welfare and the economy will increase from 1.1% of GDP in 2022 to 3.3% by 2050 and 7.4% by 2100 ([London School of Economics 2022](#)).

Data in Wales

- In 2022, 97% said that they think that the world's climate is changing ([Welsh Government 2023](#)) and in 2021-22 20% reported experiencing ill-health due to extreme weather ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)).
- The annual number of heat-related deaths in England and Wales is set to rise by up to fiftyfold over the next 50 years due to climate change ([University College London 2025](#)).
- The cost of air pollution estimated in 2016 was almost £1 billion a year in health service costs and reduced productivity through lost work-days ([Public Health Wales 2016](#)).



⁶ Human illnesses caused by parasites, viruses and bacteria that are transmitted by living organisms.

Public views in Wales

Climate and health

82% are fairly or very concerned about climate change ([Public Health Wales 2022](#)) and approximately nine in ten (89%) strongly agree or tend to agree with policies to improve public transport to help reduce climate change ([Public Health Wales 2022](#)). Around three quarters (74%) report that access to nature and outdoor space has a positive impact on their health ([Public Health Wales 2024](#)).



Why policy action can make a real difference

Policies can protect and improve health in many ways, including through cleaner air, active travel, accessible public transport, sustainable food and greener communities.

- Preventative measures are likely to cost less than responding to the damage caused by climate change ([Welsh Government 2024](#)).
- Every £1 spent on active travel infrastructure can return an average of £5.62 and returns can increase over time ([The Institute for Public Policy Research 2024](#)).
- On average, life expectancy is longer in areas with greater access to green spaces; about three years longer among men (81.2 years) and about two years longer among women (84.7 years) (compared with 78.2 years for men and 82.8 years for women in areas with lowest access to green space) ([Health Foundation 2024](#)).

Action across these five areas will help build a healthier, fairer and more prosperous Wales for the future and support a strong sustainable health and care system.