

Our Approach to Health Inequalities

Purpose

This narrative describes what health inequalities are and what causes them. It sets out the role Public Health Wales plays in tackling health inequalities. This narrative is intended for Public Health Wales staff to facilitate engagement and discussion.



Too many people in our communities in Wales are **experiencing poor health or living shorter lives** because of **avoidable and unfair harms** to their health. These differences in health outcomes are known as **health inequalities**.



For good health people need the right **building blocks** in place – like good housing, fair work, nurturing childhoods, and access to healthcare.



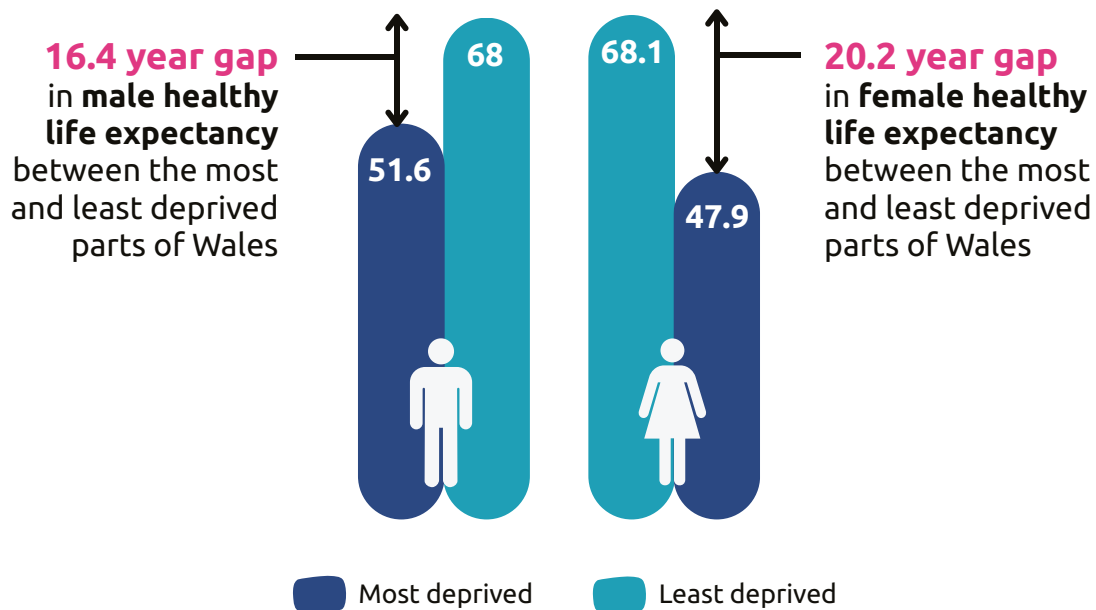
Public Health Wales is working to reduce these inequalities by **informing, advocating, and mobilising action**, and by ensuring our services deliver for all. We want to create a Wales where everyone has a **fair chance to live well and live longer in good health**.



What are Health Inequalities?

Health inequalities are differences in health between groups of people and communities. We care about the differences in health between groups of people and communities because they are not fair and can be avoided. We call these unfair and avoidable differences “health inequities”.

Figure 1. Healthy life expectancy at birth, males and females, Wales by most and least deprived, 2018-2022¹



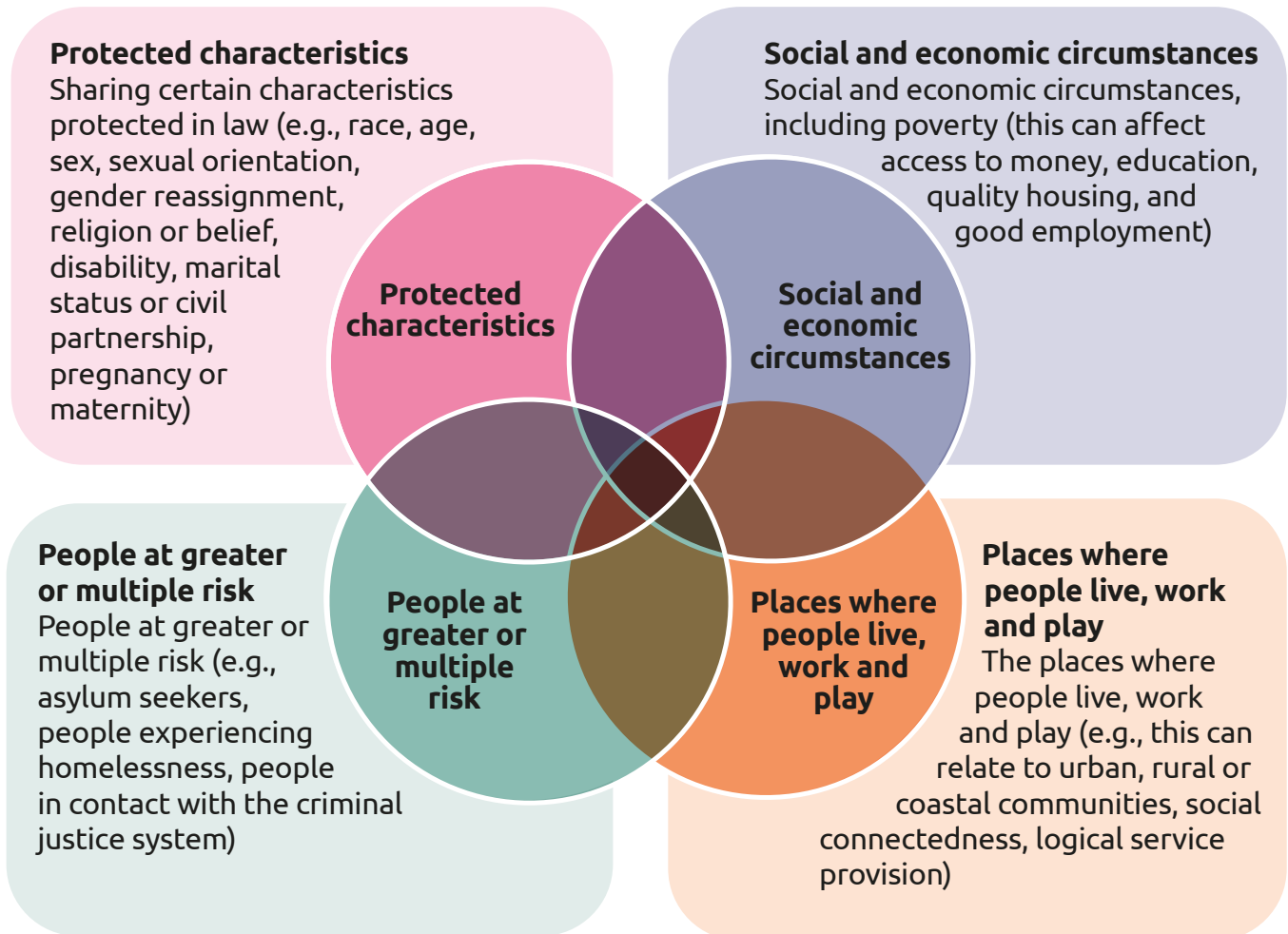
Who experiences health inequalities?²

Health inequalities can affect people based on factors such as:

- **Social and economic circumstances** (like poverty, education, housing, and jobs)
- **Protected characteristics** under the law (e.g. race, age, sex, disability, religion)
- **Higher-risk groups** (e.g. asylum seekers, people who are homeless or involved in the justice system)
- **Where they live and spend time** (e.g. urban, rural, or coastal areas, and access to local services)

Many people belong to more than one of these groups. This is called **intersectionality**, which can make health inequalities even worse. The figure below illustrates the intersecting nature of these factors.^{3,4}

Figure 2. Considerations of population groups and geographies commonly considered when identifying health inequalities.^{3,4}



Key legislation

Several key pieces of legislation in Wales provide strong foundations for tackling health inequalities:

- **Equality Act 2010:** Introduces the Public Sector Equality Duty, requiring public bodies to consider how their decisions affect people with protected characteristics, promoting fairness and equal opportunity.
- **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015:** Mandates public bodies to work towards well-being goals, including a more equal Wales, encouraging long-term, preventative approaches to reducing inequality.
- **Socio-economic Duty (part of the Equality Act 2010, enacted in Wales in 2021):** Requires public bodies to consider how their strategic decisions can reduce the inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic disadvantage.

The building blocks of health

Everyone in Wales should have the opportunity to be healthy. However, too many people have poor health and live shorter lives. To build a healthier future for Wales, we need the right building blocks in place: good quality homes, fair work, enough money, safe and nurturing childhoods, and strong relationships.

Figure 3: The building blocks of health



In too many parts of Wales, these building blocks are not strong enough or they are missing altogether. These differences in health often arise early in our lives and can worsen over our lifetime.

They affect our mental well-being, behaviours, exposure to environmental harms and infections and access to services. All of these can further increase health inequalities and affect our ability to adapt to, and recover from, the challenges we face.

Our experience of these building blocks are influenced by commercial forces, political priorities and the unequal distribution of income, wealth and power.

Our experiences of health are also affected by discrimination and stigma, related to prejudices and the design of systems failing to take account of the diversity of our population.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We can make changes so that more people in Wales have a fair chance to live longer, healthier lives. We can work to remove the barriers in their surroundings that make it harder to be healthy.



What is the difference between Health Equality and Health Equity?

The figure below illustrates the difference between health equality and health equity.

- **Equality** is treating everyone the same, giving individuals or groups the same resources, opportunities, and rights regardless of their differences.
- **Equity** is ensuring everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health.⁵

Focusing on **equity** helps ensure that **everyone can be as healthy as possible**, no matter where they start from.

Figure 4: Equality vs Equity



Health Equity doesn't mean
treating everyone the same

What is Public Health Wales doing to improve equity and equality?

Strategic context in Wales

We have unique opportunities in Wales to make changes. For example, legal duties set out in by the *Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* and the *Equality Act (2010)* – including the *Socio-Economic Duty* – make sure that that we consider the long-term impacts of our decisions on the health and wellbeing of everyone in Wales and prevents on-going problems across these areas. The *Duty of Quality* promotes equity, person centred care and a focus on improving population health outcomes. In addition, health impact assessments required by the *Public Health Act (2017)* and the preventative approach of *A Healthier Wales (2018)* supports us to consider the building blocks of health and wellbeing.

Role of Public Health Wales

Our long-term strategy states that ***“With our partners we aim to increase healthy life expectancy, improve health and wellbeing, and reduce inequalities for everyone in Wales, now and for future generations.”***

‘We exist to help All people in Wales live longer, healthier lives.’

We have identified six strategic priorities and we seek to reduce health inequalities through action across all of these.

Figure 5. Six strategic priorities of Public Health Wales’ Long-term Strategy (2023-2035).



Four activities help us as an organisation to help everyone in Wales be healthier:

- 1. Inform** partners on the current and emerging threats to Wales, the factors which influence health, well-being and inequalities and the evidence for action.
- 2. Advocate** for action to improve and protect health and reduce inequalities.
- 3. Mobilise** partners across systems to translate evidence into policy and practice at scale to improve population health and well-being and reduce health inequalities.
- 4. Deliver** evidence informed services to the public.

We work with Welsh Government, Health Boards, Local Authorities, third sector organisations, communities and service users and others across Wales and internationally to improve health for everyone. No single organisation can achieve the necessary changes on its own, so Public Health Wales needs to collaborate with partners to make a meaningful impact.

Role of Public Health Wales as an Employer

Aside from our role and purpose to work towards our overarching outcome to increase life expectancy and narrow the gap, as an employer of 2,400 people in locations across Wales, we want to provide an environment where everyone is encouraged to be themselves, this is outlined in [Our Strategic Equality Plan and objectives 2024-2028](#).

Figure 6. The role of Public Health Wales



Making a difference to health inequalities involves taking action in three key areas:

- **Tackling the root causes** – such as reducing inequalities in income, wealth, and power.
- **Shaping the wider conditions for health** – by improving essential factors like good jobs, quality housing, access to education, and healthy built environments.
- **Enhancing people's day-to-day experiences** – including ensuring fair access to, and high-quality delivery of, health and care services.

We will bring together partners across Wales to work together to improve health for everyone. Our approach to engagement ensures that we make connections between partners to show how they can work with us and contribute to improving health and reducing health inequalities for everyone in Wales. In addition, we actively involve communities in our work to better understand the experiences of different groups of people and to identify policies and practices that will help to improve health for everyone and reduce health inequalities.

Together, we can help every person to have a fair chance to be as healthy as possible.

Definitions

Term	Definition
Health inequalities	Differences in health between different groups of people. These can be measured. ⁵
Health inequities	Unfair and avoidable health differences between groups, often caused by things like poverty or poor living conditions. ^{6,7}
Health equity	When everyone has a fair chance to be healthy, no matter their background or situation. ³
Equality	Treating everyone the same, giving them the same rights and chances. ⁵

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