

## What's the issue?

### Child poverty

Child poverty in the UK is growing and estimated to affect more than 4 million children.<sup>1</sup> This approximately equates to 9 in a classroom of 30 children.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the population, 34% of children live in poverty.<sup>3</sup> These children may experience poor physical and mental health and may not reach their full potential in school. Research indicates that poverty is linked directly to family unemployment, poor housing, debt, homelessness and poor life chances in adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, poverty can be measured in two ways. Relative poverty is a calculation of income available to a person or family. If their income is below 60% of the average income across the country, then they are determined to be living in relative poverty. This is called the poverty line. Absolute poverty looks at the average income of a household today and compares this to 60% of the average household income earned in 2010 to make a comparison across a number of years.

Research indicates that after housing costs, relative poverty equates to income less than: £248 a week for a couple with no children; £144 a week for a single person with no children; £401 a week for a couple with two children aged between five and 14; £297 a week for single parent with two children aged between five and 14.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.childrengsociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty/what-is-child-poverty>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201617>

<sup>3</sup> <https://fullfact.org/economy/poverty-uk-guide-facts-and-figures/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/141775/CMO\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2011\\_Chapter\\_4.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/141775/CMO_Annual_Report_2011_Chapter_4.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Public Health England (2018) *Child and Maternal Health, Child Health Profiles*. Available at: <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/child-health-profiles/data#page/3/qjd/1938133228/pat/15/par/E92000001/ati/154/are/E38000056/iid/92757/age/28/sex/4> (Accessed: 4 October 2019).

### Health inequalities

Poverty affects children's life chances and their health. Recent data from Public Health England, suggests that some health outcomes of children and young people are declining. For example, the number of A&E attendances and emergency hospital admissions for children under 5 are increasing, the number of children receiving 2 doses of the MMR immunisation is decreasing, hospital admissions for self-harm in those age 10-24 is increasing, chlamydia detection rate in adolescents is decreasing, and the number of children aged 10-11 years who are overweight is increasing<sup>6</sup>.

Child obesity rates in England are amongst the worst in Europe<sup>7</sup>, breastfeeding rates in the UK are one of the lowest in the world<sup>8</sup>, and in 2019 England lost its WHO measles elimination status<sup>9</sup>. Poor health outcomes and health inequalities early in life are cumulative and enduring if not addressed.

Child poverty is an issue across the globe. A recent report from the United Nations<sup>10</sup> estimated that globally in 2018, 85% of deaths in children and young people happened in the first five years of life, and largely most died of preventable or treatable causes. For those under the age of 15 years, the risk of dying was highest in the first month of life.

<sup>7</sup> Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2019) *State of Child Health: England – Two years on*. (Accessed: 4 October 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Victoria C, Bhal R, Barros A, Franca G, Horton S, Krasevec J et al (2016) Breastfeeding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: epidemiology, mechanisms, and lifelong effect, *The Lancet*, 387 (10017), pp. 475-490.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Health and Social Care (2019) *Press release: Prime Minister orders urgent action to improve vaccination uptake*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-orders-urgent-action-to-improve-vaccination-uptake> (Accessed: 23 September 2019).

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, WHO (2019) *Levels and Trends in Child Mortality: Report 2019*. Available at <https://childmortality.org/> (Accessed: 23 September 2019).

### What needs to happen?

Poverty must not be a barrier to children achieving their potential and living healthy lives. Tackling child poverty requires a cross-governmental approach which includes early intervention for good health care, access to education, and a supportive welfare system. All four countries across the UK must work to end child poverty that children and families can thrive.

In 2010, the UK Government created The Child Poverty Act, setting UK-wide targets to end child poverty by 2020. It required each country to have Government-led strategies for eradicating child poverty, placing statutory duties on local authorities and regional bodies to cooperate to tackle child poverty, report on child poverty levels and prepare a local strategy in their areas. These targets have not been met, and in reality, child poverty levels have increased.

Following this, each country in the UK introduced a Children's (and Young People's) Commissioner, responsible for promoting the rights and protections of children, and to advocate for their interests in policies and decisions that will affect their lives. Strategies were also developed by each parliament to set out the ways in which they would take this injustice.

#### Scotland

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 places a duty on the Scottish Government to eradicate child poverty by 2030.<sup>11</sup> To accompany this the Scottish Government also published Every Child, Every Chance: the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22 on 29 March 2018.<sup>12</sup>

#### Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the End Child Poverty campaign reported that an average of 25.12% (103,400 out of a total of 444,000)

of children in Northern Ireland were living in poverty in 2017.<sup>13</sup> The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children estimates that the majority (61%) live in households with at least one parent who is working.<sup>14</sup> The Institute for Fiscal Studies warns that the level of child poverty in Northern Ireland will increase to more than 30% by 2020 without major interventions to support family income and opportunities for low income children.

#### Wales

The Welsh Government launched their Child Poverty Strategy in 2011, affirming an ambition to end child poverty by 2020. The strategy outlined objectives to reduce the number of families living in workless households; improve the skills of parents and young people living in low income households; and reduce inequalities that exist in health and education outcomes. Initiatives include the Healthy Child Wales Programme, seeking to deliver a universal health service to all children, and the Flying Start Programme, an early years programme for children and families from disadvantaged areas.

### As the RCN we are:

#### Working in coalition

This year marks the ten-year anniversary of former Prime Minister Tony Blair making a speech at Toynbee Hall and a pledge to end child poverty by 2020. This target has not been met by successive governments.

We have joined the End Child Poverty coalition – an active coalition with a focus on campaigning by publishing constituency level data on prevalence of poverty annually and help their supporters to directly lobby MPs.

<sup>11</sup><http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2017/6/contents/enacted>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/>

<sup>13</sup><http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.niccy.org/childpoverty>

As an ECP member, we support their calls for action on:

### 1. Income

- Restore link between benefits and inflation
- Make up for the loss in the real value in children's benefits as a result of the 4-year freeze and sub-inflation increases in benefit rates
- Lift both the benefit cap and the two-child limit in child tax credit and Universal Credit
- Reform Universal Credit starting by ending the five-week wait.

### 2. Housing

- Ensure housing support closes the gap with and keeps pace with local rents

### 3. Services

- Reverse the cuts and re-invest in children's services such as social care, mental health, education and childcare

#### *Campaigning for more health visitors and school nurses*

Nursing staff are with children at every stage throughout their development and therefore witness first-hand the barriers that poverty has on children's health outcomes and inequalities.

Health visitors and school nurses are in a position to identify risk and tackle issues and inequalities in health and wellbeing, as well as broader issues such as serious youth violence.

We know that despite the important role these professionals play, there are not enough of them to provide care to all children and families who need it. The latest available data on vacancy rates in England tell us there has been a 25% decline of school nurses from 2,987 in May 2010 to 2,218 in January 2019. Nursing vacancy rates are preventing our members from providing safe and effective care.

Investing in the health visitor and school nursing workforce would allow greater access to the crucial services and support that they provide. Furthermore, the workforce having enough time and resource would allow them to work to the full potential of their role and move towards promotion of health and wellbeing, rather than management of disease.

In countries where substantial progress in reducing child or maternal mortality has been made, this has been linked specifically to improved access to quality health care by investing in the health workforce, introducing free care for pregnant women and children and supporting family planning.

Access to health visitors and school nurses should be universal. There are many contextual factors which could be resulting in the deteriorating trends for some health outcomes of children and young people. The value of health visitors and school nurses is clearly demonstrated.

#### *Engaging with the Children's (and Young People's) Commissioners across the UK*

We sought to engage with the Children's (and Young People's) Commissioners in every country across the UK. We expect them to use their role to speak out about the impact that fewer health visitors and school nurses have on children's health outcomes, and to continue to do all they can to ensure that the rights, views and interests of children in policies and decisions in governments is prioritised.

#### **How can you help and get involved?**

Join the children and young people's forum, or our public health forum via our website: [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk)

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