

# Conclusion



Children and young people make up almost a third of the population of Wales; services must recognise and respond to their needs. This is a stage of life when individuals can become full, engaged and active citizens but it is also a stage when they are vulnerable. They, and their families, need particular support and also need to be engaged in the changes that affect them. This is fundamental to the rights now enshrined within the *Rights of children and young persons (Wales) measure 2011*.<sup>1</sup>

The basis for every aspect of human development is laid down during pregnancy and in early childhood. There is increasing evidence that the development of children can be influenced to maximise their health, social and educational development, but this needs to be done as early as possible. Evidence of the effectiveness of interventions among children, particularly in the early years, makes a strong economic case for investment. This is one of the most effective mechanisms for tackling inequalities in health. Evidence for this is outlined in *Fairer society healthy lives: the Marmot review*.<sup>2</sup> The first policy recommendation from this review is to 'Increase the proportion of overall expenditure allocated to the early years and ensure expenditure on early years development is focused progressively across the social gradient'.<sup>2 (p.16)</sup>

The health of children and young people is shaped by the conditions and circumstances in which they and their families live. One in five children live in poverty and many provide unpaid care. Patterns of educational attainment reflect those of deprivation and poverty. These determinants negatively impact life chances, perpetuating the cycle of socio-economic inequality. Addressing these determinants is at the heart of any sustainable approach to improving the health and well-being of the children of Wales.

There are opportunities throughout childhood to support a healthy environment; this begins before birth, with good maternal nutrition and free from tobacco. These are key factors that affect low birth weight, which in turn impacts on future health outcomes. At birth, only around half of children are breastfed. Although vaccination uptake in the early years has improved, a fifth of four year olds have not had the full complement of vaccines. Many older children remain vulnerable to vaccine preventable disease such as measles.

The circumstances in which people live are very much reflected in their behaviour. By the end of the early years around one in eight children are obese, more than in any English region. Many teenagers take up the addictive use of tobacco; a product which is implicated in the death of half of its users. Alcohol misuse also remains common among young people in Wales. Rates of teenage pregnancy have been relatively high in Wales, but are falling.

Most children are in good health and report a good quality of life. However, Wales tends to fare less well than its neighbours on these measures. This report highlights the good news that children with severe conditions such as hypoplastic left heart syndrome, are now living beyond the age of five, where previously there was little possibility of survival. Although outcomes for many children with conditions improve, there are still children living on with chronic conditions or disabilities. Services need to not only consider the needs of children, but particularly their transition to adult services. In terms of death and disability, injuries have a major impact on our children and young people.

The data and evidence outlined in this report provides an opportunity to strengthen the focus on children and young people in all work undertaken in Wales, particularly within Single Integrated Plans. Key to supporting children is supporting their families and communities. Much work is underway in Wales but there is clearly more that needs to be done.

## References

1. Welsh Government. *Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011*. Cardiff: Welsh Government; 2011. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/legislation/programme/previouslegislation/assemblymeasures/rightsofchildren/?lang=en>
2. University College London. *Fair society, healthy lives: Marmot review*. London; 2010. Available at: <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/Content/FileManager/pdf/fairsocietyhealthylives.pdf>