



## *Health Equals' response to the consultation by the Labour National Policy Forum on 'Public services that work from the start' – March 2023*

### **About Health Equals**

Health Equals welcomes the opportunity provide its views towards the Labour National Policy Forum consultation. Health Equals is a coalition of 29 organisations across the business, charity and thinktank sectors who are committed to the shared ambition of reducing health inequalities across the UK through rebuilding the foundations of what makes a society healthy – good jobs, safe homes, clean air and the best start to life in childhood. We are campaigning for a future where the systems and environments around us support our health and everyone has the best opportunity in life to be healthy, regardless of who they are or where they live.

### **Summary of recommendations supporting**

We recommend the National Policy Forum:

- Recognises the contributions that the building blocks of health have on health inequalities and commits to a long-term cross-governmental strategy where every department ensures their actions support health and narrow inequalities.
- Prioritises work and income, housing and air quality as areas where immediate action is required to prevent ongoing harm and narrow health inequalities in the short-term.
- Puts mental health on equal parity with physical health in all health-relevant policies.
- Prioritises childhood health, which predetermines many of a child's future prospects for health, wellbeing and livelihood, in any public health or prevention policies.
- Works directly with those who work with people most affected by health inequalities to identify gaps in research needed to put health at the heart of government policy.

### **What makes us healthy?**

Up to 60% of our health is shaped by the systems and environments in which we live, work, play and grow, and not by our genes, our access to healthcare or the choices we make.<sup>1</sup> Most of these systems and environments, that have material and significant impacts on our health, are outside of our personal control – whether it be our wages, the condition of our home, or the quality of the air we breathe. These building blocks of health span the remits of multiple government departments outside of Health and Social Care.

These are the foundations of our health and because they are factors are outside our individual control, they result in health inequalities, across geographies, age groups and ethnic groups. For example, there is a life expectancy gap for men of 13.7 years between the most and least affluent areas of the UK.<sup>2</sup> This gap shows us that poor health is not inevitable, and that many people live in

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<sup>1</sup> King's Fund *Broader determinants of health: Future trends* <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/time-think-differently/trends-broader-determinants-health>

<sup>2</sup> National Records of Scotland (2022) *Life Expectancy in Scotland, 2019-2021* <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/life-expectancy/life-expectancy-in-scotland/2019-2021>

areas where social, environmental, and economic factors support and improve their health and enable them to stay healthy. It is vital that we give everyone those opportunities wherever they live or whatever their circumstances.

Poor health prevents people from being able to fulfil their potential, puts undue strain on the NHS and harms the economy. Preventing ill health through providing health promoting systems and environments will provide significant benefits to the NHS, given that 10% of the UK population is currently on an NHS waiting list for ill health,<sup>3</sup> and for the economy, given that ill health in working age people costs the UK economy £150bn per year.<sup>4</sup> This is a problem that is only getting worse - 500,000 more people are now economically inactive due to poor health than in 2019.<sup>5</sup>

Resolving these issues and narrowing health inequalities requires ambition and long-term commitment – the exact opposite of the ‘sticking plaster’ approach we currently have. They are caused by complex, systemic issues spanning multiple government departments at the national, regional and local level. For the past decade, the joined-up policy approach across government necessary to address health inequalities has been severely lacking. **We therefore recommend that a Labour Government recognises the contributions that the building blocks of health have on health inequalities and commits to a long-term cross-governmental strategy where every department ensures their actions support health and narrow inequalities.**

### **Urgent priorities for improving people’s health**

Across the building blocks of health, there are three that are particularly well evidenced by Health Equals’ members as causing acute health issues at a large scale in the UK today and could be readily addressed with sufficient ambition:

- The first of these is **work and income**. Lacking financial security or living in poverty are powerful risk factors for ill health through denying people the opportunity to make healthy decisions, or by forcing them to take unhealthy ones such as choosing between ‘heating and eating’.<sup>6</sup>
- The second of these is **housing**. The UK has some of the oldest housing stock in Europe, and millions of people are living in homes that are detracting from their health.<sup>7</sup> These include homes which are cold, damp, or mouldy, which harm everyone who resides in them but are particularly dangerous for people with asthma, leading to many preventable deaths each year.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> British Medical Association (2022) *NHS backlog data analysis* <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/nhs-backlog-data-analysis>

<sup>4</sup> Times Health Commission (2023) *Rising levels of ill health costing economy £150bn a year* <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rising-levels-of-ill-health-costing-economy-150bn-a-year-x5dkcn5jg>

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics (2022) *Half a million more people are out of the labour force because of long-term sickness* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/economicinactivity/articles/halfamillionmorepeopleareoutofthelabourforcebecauseoflongtermsickness/2022-11-10>

<sup>6</sup> Office for Improving Health and Disparities (2022) *Wider determinants of health* <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/wider-determinants>

<sup>7</sup> BRE Group (2020) *The Housing Stock of the United Kingdom* [https://files.bregroup.com/bretrust/The-Housing-Stock-of-the-United-Kingdom\\_Report\\_BRE-Trust.pdf](https://files.bregroup.com/bretrust/The-Housing-Stock-of-the-United-Kingdom_Report_BRE-Trust.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Royal College of Physicians (2014) *National Review of Asthma Deaths (NRAD) 2014* <https://www.asthma.org.uk/293597ee/globalassets/campaigns/nrad-full-report.pdf>

- Thirdly, poor **air quality** affects us all and is implicated in approximately 30,000 deaths in the UK annually.<sup>9</sup> The issue is so pressing that the Chief Medical Officer's 2022 report examined the issue.<sup>10</sup>

**We therefore recommend that immediate adoption of health promoting policies in the areas of work and income, housing and air quality to prevent further health harm and reduce health inequalities.**

Finally, there are two underpinning principles that should be part of any action plans to prevent ill health or support the health of the population. The first is recognising that our childhood health and experiences are strong determinants of our future health and wellbeing and should therefore be a priority for policy.<sup>11</sup> **We recommend that the health and wellbeing of children form the core of public health and prevention approaches, to ensure that every child has the best opportunity in life.** The second is ensuring that mental health is given equal parity to physical health – it is known that people who suffer from mental ill health are more likely to develop physical health conditions, and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> **We recommend that all attempts to prevent ill health through policy reform need to account for the important link between mental and physical health and ensure that mental and physical health co-benefits are at the heart of policy.**

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<sup>9</sup> Public Health England (2009) *COMEAP: long-term exposure to air pollution: effect on mortality* [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/304667/COMEAP\\_long\\_term\\_exposure\\_to\\_air\\_pollution.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/304667/COMEAP_long_term_exposure_to_air_pollution.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Department of Health and Social Care (2022) *Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report 2022: Air pollution* [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1124738/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-air-pollution-dec-2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1124738/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-air-pollution-dec-2022.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee (2019) *First 1000 days of life* <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhealth/1496/1496.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Mental Health Foundation (2022) *How does my mental health affect my physical health?* <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/physical-health-and-mental-health>

## **Appendix**

### ***About Health Equals***

Health Equals is the UK's campaign for improving health opportunities. Funded by the Health Foundation for £12m over 5 years, we are a new coalition bringing together the UK's leading voices from across the business, non-profit, think tank and health sectors. Our 29 strong membership has come together in recognition that the varied work they do is fundamentally linked to health.

We're committed to shaping a society that values everyone's health, where each of us has our best chance of a healthy life. For that everyone should have access to the basic building blocks of good health: a warm home, a good job, and neighbourhoods with clean air and green space. We welcome further opportunities to support Labour's policy development through the broad expertise and experience of our members.

### ***Our campaign***

We will be launching a major public awareness-raising campaign focused on drawing attention to the stark health inequalities in the UK from March 2023.

At the same time, we have commissioned research from three of our partners – Crisis, the Learning and Work Institute, and Global Action Plan – focused on developing specific policy recommendations to address health inequalities in three initial priority areas: housing; work and income; and air quality. This research will be ready in the latter half of this year. Further research pieces focused on additional building blocks will be commissioned next year.

Throughout the five-year campaign, we will be seeking to engage with national, devolved and local political stakeholders to highlight the issue of health inequalities and champion policies that promote good health.

If you have any questions regarding our campaign, please do not hesitate to contact:

[james.squires@health.org.uk](mailto:james.squires@health.org.uk).

### ***Our membership***

- British Red Cross
- Centre for Mental Health
- Citizens Advice
- Confederation of British Industry
- Crisis
- Fairness Foundation
- Food Foundation
- Global Action Plan
- Institute for Public Policy Research
- Institute for Employment Studies
- Institute of Health Equity
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Learning and Work Institute
- Legal & General
- Lloyds Bank Foundation
- Local Government Association
- Mind
- New Philanthropy Capital
- People's Health Trust
- Race Equality Foundation
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Royal National Institute of Blind People
- Royal Society for Public Health
- ShareAction
- Shelter
- The Health Foundation
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Trades Union Congress
- What Works Centre for Wellbeing