



Exploring the local policy context for reducing health inequalities in children and young people: an in depth qualitative case study of one local authority in the North of England, UK

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About the research

Improving children and young people’s (CYP) health and addressing health inequalities are international priorities. Reducing inequalities is particularly pertinent in light of the Covid-19 outbreak which has exacerbated already widening inequalities in health.

This research reports on a qualitative case study of one local authority in the North of England, UK. The aim of the research was to explore understandings of inequality, anticipated pathways for reducing inequalities among CYP and the key factors affecting the development and implementation of policy to reduce inequalities among CYP at a local level.

The research involved in-depth interviews with stakeholders with a remit in child health, observations of meetings where decisions on child health were made, and a review of local policy documentation.

Further information

Further information can be found on the SPHR website here:

<https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/category/research/children-young-people-families/inequalities-children-young-people-families/>

The findings of the study are published as: [Holding, E., Fairbrother, H., Griffin, N. et al. Exploring the local policy context for reducing health inequalities in children and young people: an in depth qualitative case study of one local authority in the North of England, UK. BMC Public Health 21, 887 \(2021\).](#)

“There’s an awful lot of deprivation here. Some of our villages are the worst in Europe, not just in the UK. Austerity has hit [this area] very hard...So, it’s impacted across the whole system really. Those little cuts in every area, when you put them all together, have had a devastating effect” Local authority employee

Conclusions

Despite increased calls for a ‘whole systems’ approach to reducing inequalities in health, significant barriers to implementation remain.

National governments need to work towards more joined up policy making, which takes into consideration regional disparities, allows for flexibility in interpretation and addresses the different and interrelated social determinants of health.

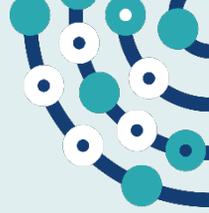
Our findings have particular significance in light of Covid-19 and indicate the need for systems level policy responses and a health in all policies approach.

Policy implications

We developed a number of local and national recommendations for action on health inequalities:

- Local policy makers should look to build a local health system which considers inequalities as unjust – key to this is the development of a consistent definition of the term ‘health inequalities’.
- Local policy makers should continue to shift focus from downstream, behavioural interventions to prevention and early intervention.
- Our findings reinforce findings from the Marmot review (2020) which calls for an overarching health inequalities strategy at a national level and proportionate universal funding based on need and place. Such policies should involve actors across the system to target the social determinants of health.
- Child health advocates should continue to press for investment and commitment to reducing health inequalities at a national level.

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Key findings

A number of key findings emerged:

- Participants understood inequalities as ‘differences’ and ‘variation’ in health status linked to socioeconomic position
- Differences in the local environment (e.g. socioeconomic opportunities linked to previous industry) are integral for creating and sustaining health inequalities
- Early help and preventative services (such as health visiting and Family Hubs services), identifying and targeting at risk families, locality working in areas of high deprivation, focus on the whole family and place based/systems approaches were seen as key pathways to reducing inequalities in CYP health
- Participants demonstrated differing understandings of systems approaches – but were mostly focused on partnership working and organisational integration
- Local action to reduce health inequalities is extremely challenging in the face of high levels of deprivation, poverty and cuts to budgets – creating problems for joint working and ‘systems approaches’ across services
- Local and national policy were seen by some participants as too narrowly focused (e.g. on one policy area) to address the root causes of problems (such as poverty) through collective action – failing to recognise differences in place

Contact the researchers

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About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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