

Association of British Paediatric Nurses Background briefing on Health Visiting

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to inform Association of British Paediatric Nurses (ABPN) members about the provision of a health visiting service across the UK

Background

Health visitors that have completed a post-registration specialist community public health education programme¹ work with children up to the age of five, parents and families to improve health and wellbeing, reduce inequalities and address vulnerabilities.

Health visitors deliver:

Universal services – includes home visits, development checks, information about healthy start issues like parenting and immunisations, identification of child development concerns, help to tackle childhood obesity and improve maternal mental health

Targeted services – short-term extra support including clinical interventions for example helping a depressed mother with a new baby, identifying speech or language problems and providing advice and support during the transition to school

Specialist services – Specialist health visitors for example work with children who have complex health care needs, such as life-limiting health conditions, severe learning difficulties, or physical neurological impairment

Positive outcomes have been demonstrated by intensive home visiting programmes such as Early Start², The Triple P – Positive Parenting Programme³ and the Family-Nurse Partnership programmes^{4,5,6}.

Some health visitors are employed by independent and private organisations and contracted to provide a health visiting service locally.

An overview of the current situation across the UK

There are differences in the focus of the child health programme, mandated contacts, priorities and service specifications between the four nations of the UK.

England

In 2013 commissioning of health visiting services became the responsibility of local authorities. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities has produced service specifications for the commissioning of health visiting services that describes high impact areas, supports integrated delivery and co-commissioning⁷.

Early years high impact areas include:

- transition to parenthood and the early weeks
- maternal and infant mental health
- breastfeeding (initiation and duration)
- healthy weight and healthy nutrition
- health literacy
- reducing accidents and minor illnesses
- health, wellbeing and development (ready to learn, narrowing the 'word gap')

There are five mandated contacts as follows:

- Pre-birth
- 10-14 days
- 3-5 weeks
- 6-8 weeks
- 9 months to 1 year
- 2-2 ½ years

The Royal College of Nursing and Institute of Health Visiting have raised concerns regarding the decrease in health visitors and funding for public health services since 2013^{8,9,10}.

The Independent review of the NHS in England by Lord Darzi (2024)¹¹ highlighted that there was a need for a shift towards more integrated, preventative care closer to home. Health visitors have a key role in improving the health and wellbeing of children and families.

Key policy documents include:

Public Health England (2017) Universal health visiting service: mandate review¹²

Public Health England (2018) Healthy Child Programme: rapid review on safeguarding¹³

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2023) Commissioning health visitors and school nurses for public health services for children aged 0 to 19¹⁴

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2023) Healthy child programme¹⁵

Local Government Association (2024) Health visiting: Giving children the best start in life¹⁶

e-learning for Healthcare – Healthy child programme. E learning to optimise health¹⁷

Scotland

The Scottish Government has invested in health visiting services, funding an additional 500 health visitors between 2014 and 2018.

The Universal Health Visiting Pathway (UHP) in Scotland is a program that provides a minimum core of home visits for families from pre-birth to when the child starts school¹⁸

Families are entitled to 11 home visits, including 8 visits within the first year of life and 3 child health reviews between 13 months and 4-5 year

Mandated contacts include:

- pre-birth
- 10-14 days
- 3-5 weeks
- 6-8 weeks
- 3 months
- 8 months
- 13-15 months
- 27-30 months
- 2 years
- 4-5 years.

The UHP encompasses:

- A focus on building relationships with families and children
- An early intervention approach
- A proportionate universalism approach, which means that the service is provided to all families, but more is provided to those with greater need
- A consideration of core issues such as poverty, gender-based violence, and financial inclusion

The health visitor acts as the named professional and first point of contact for all health and wellbeing and child protection issues for children under five¹⁹.

Key policy documents and resources include:

- Scottish Government (2006) Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)²⁰.
- Scottish Government (2015) Universal Health Visiting Pathway in Scotland: pre-birth to pre-school²¹
- Scottish Government (2022) Universal Health Visiting Pathway evaluation - phase 1: main report - primary research with health visitors and parents and case note review²²
- Public Health Scotland Resources for Specialist Community Health Nursing (Health Visiting) staff and students to support delivery of the Universal Health Visiting Pathway in Scotland, Pre-Birth to Pre-School²³
- NHS Education for Scotland Speech, Language and Communication: Giving children the best possible start in life²⁴

Wales

Health visiting in Wales is a service that provides support and advice for families and children from birth up to five years old. The Healthy Child Wales Programme guides

the health visiting service in Wales and sets out the planned contacts that children and their families can expect.

Mandated contacts include:

- pre-birth
- 10-14 days
- 8 weeks
- 12 weeks
- 16 weeks
- 6 months
- 15 months
- 27 months
- 3 ½ years

Key policy documents include:

Welsh Government (2018) Healthy child Wales Programme²⁵

Welsh Government (2019) A vision for health visiting in Wales²⁶

Northern Ireland

A review of the important role of health visiting and school nurses within integrated children's services highlighted their contribution in improving the health and reducing inequalities for children and young people²⁷.

This universal service is offered to every family and includes specific contacts as part of the Healthy Child Healthy Future programme. Mandated contacts include:

- pre-birth
- 10-14 days
- 6-8 weeks
- 14-16 weeks
- 6-9 months
- 1 year
- 2-2 ½ years
- 3+ years
- 4year review

Key policy documents include:

- Department of Health (2009) Families matter: Supporting families in Northern Ireland. Regional family and parenting strategy²⁸
- Department of Health (2010) Healthy Child Healthy Future programme²⁹
- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2015) Healthy Futures 2010-2015 – The contribution of health visitors and school nurses in Northern Ireland³⁰
- Department of Health (2015) Making Life Better - Strategic Framework for Public Health (2013-2023)³¹

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References

- ¹ Nursing and Midwifery Council Standards of Proficiency for Specialist Community Public Health Nurses <https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/standards-for-post-registration/standards-of-proficiency-for-specialist-community-public-health-nurses2/>
- ² The Early Start Service is a health visiting program that provides support and education for pregnancy, parenting, and relationships.
- ³ <https://www.triplep.uk.net/uken/home/>
- ⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/family-nurse-partnership-programme>
- ⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/maternal-and-child-health/family-nurse-partnership/>
- ⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25304286/>
- ⁷ Commissioning health visitors and school nurses for public health services for children aged 0 to 19 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/healthy-child-programme-0-to-19-health-visitor-and-school-nurse-commissioning/commissioning-health-visitors-and-school-nurses-for-public-health-services-for-children-aged-0-to-19>
- ⁸ Royal College of Nursing (2017) The best start: The future of children's health, London: RCN
- ⁹ Royal College of Nursing (2018) The Best Start: The Future of children's health – One year on – Valuing school nurses and health visitors in England <https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/pdf-007000>
- ¹⁰ <https://ihv.org.uk/our-work/publications-reports/>
- ¹¹ Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-investigation-of-the-nhs-in-england>
- ¹² Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-investigation-of-the-nhs-in-england>
- ¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/healthy-child-programme-rapid-review-on-safeguarding>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/healthy-child-programme-0-to-19-health-visitor-and-school-nurse-commissioning/commissioning-health-visitors-and-school-nurses-for-public-health-services-for-children-aged-0-to-19>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/healthy-child-programme>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/giving-children-best-start-life-shining-spotlight-health-visiting>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/healthy-child-programme/>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/maternal-and-child-health/universal-health-visiting-service/>
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- ²¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/universal-health-visiting-pathway-scotland-pre-birth-pre-school/>
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- ²³ <https://learning.publichealthscotland.scot/course/view.php?id=518>
- ²⁴ <https://slctoolforhv.nes.digital/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/healthy-child-wales-programme>
- ²⁶ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/a-vision-for-health-visiting-in-wales.pdf>
- ²⁷ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/healthy-futures-2010-2015-contribution-health-visitors-and-school-nurses-northern>
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- ³¹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/making-life-better-strategic-framework-public-health>