

# Strong Families, Strong Futures

## Home-Start Cymru's calls for the next Senedd, 2026

Home-Start Cymru is dedicated to amplifying the voices of children and families across Wales on the issues that affect them the most.

Home-Start Cymru supports families across Wales's diverse demographics, all of whom face a range of challenges in their lives that affect many aspects of wellbeing; most commonly being **poor parental and child mental health, isolation, family dysfunction, child developmental delay, and the occurrence and impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**.

Over years of direct engagement, research, and relationship building with families, we have observed four central and intersecting areas that families tell us most commonly and profoundly affect their daily lives, and where they see **the greatest need for policy action**. These areas are: **First 1000 days, Dads , Neuro-divergence, and Poverty**.



### First 1000 Days

The first 1000 days of a child life is a critical time for overall development and health outcomes. Children's early attachment to their parents sets the foundation for later relationships and can influence a range of developmental outcomes later down the line.



### Dads

Support for fathers, particularly during the perinatal period, is limited and many men face barriers to accessing support that is suited to their unique needs and circumstance. Attitudes and biases surrounding mental health of fathers contribute to this group being a seldom-heard demographic.



### Neuro-Divergence (ND)

Home-Start Cymru's support is constantly evolving to respond to the high and growing levels of need for support from families with neurodiversity related issues/circumstances across our localities. Many neuro-diverse families face incredibly long waiting lists for ND diagnosis and battle ongoing social and economic disadvantage, such as poverty and stigma.



### Poverty

Around 30% of children in Wales live in poverty, and poverty amongst working families is high. Without the right policy interventions, these rates will rise in just the next few years, worsening circumstances for families and likelihood of negative outcomes for children. Poverty affects multiple layers of a family's life, creating vulnerability for both emotional and practical crisis.

# First 1000 Days

## The Current Climate

Young children of parents with poor mental health are **3 times more likely** to have a mental health problem themselves

**1 in 4** children are now being exposed to maternal mental illness. Most commonly depression and anxiety.

**25%** of parents reported concern about their relationship with their baby following the Covid-19 pandemic

**67%** of parents surveyed by HSC want support with encouraging or developing parent-child bonds

Around **1 in 5 women** will experience a mental health condition during pregnancy or in the first year after giving birth

Maternal **suicide** continues to be the **leading cause of direct deaths** amongst women occurring between six weeks and one year after the end of pregnancy

Where suicide attempts occurred during the postnatal period, women often report suicidal ideation had started **during pregnancy**, making the **antenatal period a critical period** for both antenatal and postnatal suicide prevention.

**90%** of health professionals feel they would benefit from additional training on perinatal mental health

**31%** of parents surveyed by HSC think there is not enough support for new parents in their community

*“Around 6 months after my child was born I was struggling mentally so went to my GP. I was put straight on anti-depressants and not referred into the PMH team.*

*I was being admitted almost every month to hospital as I was now struggling with Diabulimia. I was eventually referred to my community mental health team and saw a doctor regularly but he moved on and I got lost in the system.*

*I was reaching out to my Diabetes team and my health visitor but there was nothing they could do. My GP referred me to primary mental health but I was too complex for them. I just fell through so many gaps.*

**-Naomi, Cardiff**

## Our Key Calls to Policymakers

### Improve mental health support for parents during the perinatal period

- Address persistent gaps within the perinatal system, analysing recommendations for progress put forward by Royal College of Midwives Roadmap to the Right Support at the Right Time, and by Maternal Mental Health Alliance, as part of a vital aim to ensure all families receive high quality, timely care.
- Ensure there is a national oversight mechanism for the preservation and development of perinatal services in Wales, ran co-productively with stakeholders across the perinatal sector.
- Commit to addressing major gaps in provision by rolling out national pathways for fathers/partners' care.

### Prioritise focus on early intervention and prevention (EI & P) services

- Embed the EI&P framework and definition, placing it on a statutory footing, and making provision within local authorities to deliver on this.
- Prioritise a children's-rights focused approach to policy development, including commitments to considering the voices of babies.
- Invest in services that provide support around parent-infant relationships. to prevent negative outcomes for children and families.
- Increase funding to improve the reach and sustainability of vital EI & P services for families

# Dads

## The Current Climate



Around **1 in 10 men** will experience anxiety or depression during the perinatal period

Fathers with perinatal mental health problems are up to **47%** more likely to be rated as a suicide risk than at any other time in their lives

Compared to children of fathers with no Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), children of fathers who had experienced four or more ACEs were **over seven times more likely** to live in a household where mental illness was present

Absent or inconsistent father-child relationships consistently link to negative child outcomes.

**91%**

of non-resident parents in the UK are fathers

Non-resident fathers had **higher** levels of poverty and deprivation, and **lower** levels of social support, than fathers residing with their children.

**33%**

of adult domestic abuse or partner abuse is against male victims and males are **less likely to report** incidences to the police.

Despite the overwhelming need, systems, policies and general attitudes, are not equipped to support fathers in their vulnerable moments....

**49%**

of parents Home-Start Cymru surveyed don't think there is enough support available for fathers in their community

Dads supported by HSC via the Dad Matters Programme told us:

- They often felt concerned about living up to expectations as fathers and role models.
- Finding a balance between work responsibilities and spending quality time with their newborn and partner was a worry.
- They felt 'pushed out' of the pregnancy process by services.
- They were concerned about maintaining stability and providing for their family.

*"The trouble today is that Dads are expected to 'get on with it'. However nobody really wants to know how you are feeling or what you've been through as you aren't the one that has to go through childbirth etc. Having someone to talk to about the good and the bad is invaluable and should be celebrated."*

**-Gareth, Rhondda Cynon Taf**

## Our Key Calls to Policymakers

### Embed expectations for enlisting a whole family approach into ways of working:

- Both specialist and non-specialist mental health services embed best practice for holistic working into their practices to prevent the ripple effect of mental health challenges on families and long term disadvantage.
- Develop specialist services to be more inclusive of dads at key stages, particularly during the antenatal period.

### Create strong, accessible services in response to the unique and often unmet needs of fathers:

- Provide long term sustainable investment for third sector services to deliver personal and community orientated interventions to fathers and their families.
- Address major national data gaps to provide better insight and understanding into the needs of fathers

### Address social stigma and bias surrounding fathers' parental role and mental health:

- Roll out learning, training, and resources accessible to all professionals interacting with fathers and their families about the needs of fathers, challenging attitudes around gender bias, and ways to spot and respond to signs of distress.

# Neuro-Divergence (ND)

## The Current Climate

**41 %** of parents surveyed by HSC have been waiting over three years for an ND assessment for their child

Between 2022- 2024 waiting times for ASD and ADHD diagnosis have **significantly increased** across six of the seven health board areas

Due to rising waiting times for ND assessments , more and **more families are seeking private diagnoses**. However, getting a private diagnosis does not guarantee that someone will be able to access treatment or medication through the NHS. Whilst some GPs will recognise a private diagnosis, others will not., and some local authorities may not accept the results of private autism diagnoses.

Adults with autism were found to experience **higher rates of mental health challenges** and have a **lower quality of life**. These quality of life adverse findings are related mainly to social inclusion and interaction

Emerging research suggests there is strong connection between Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and **higher vulnerability of developing PTSD**

Growing evidence suggests neuro-divergent families are **disproportionately affected by poverty** due to the unique costs associated with caring for neuro-divergent children, and the assistance schemes families are often excluded from.

**64 %** of parents surveyed by HSC want information and guidance on their child's diagnosis

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*"I think schools need training to understand ND better and how to support families suspecting ND because we didn't feel listened to. It seems unless a child is disruptive, they don't want to know."*

**-Julia & Simon, Methyr Tydfil**

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*"I always tell our supported families that are waiting for an assessment to double check that they are actually on the waiting list. We've had so many incidents where families think they are on the list but they're actually not and have no idea."*

**-Deborah, HSC Staff Member**

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*"There are costs to caring for ND children that many people don't realise. I'm replacing clothes so often because of my child chewing at the sleeves."*

**Parent, Merthyr Tydfil**

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## Our Key Calls to Policymakers

**Facilitate strengthened relationships between families and schools in order to ensure children's needs are met accurately and early on.**

- Improve understanding around neuro-divergence amongst all educational professionals.
- Introduce standards for consistent embedment of parent voice across decision making and teaching approaches for their neuro-divergent children.
- Invest in third sector services that can help to support families through transitions.

**Ensure all families have access to quality support, regardless of diagnosis.**

- Improve funding and resources for third sector services able to work with families to understand their children's, or their own, behaviour/needs and strengthen parent-child bonds.
- Improve wider understanding of ND amongst the public, challenging negative attitudes/bias.

**Address the unique financial and practical disadvantages neuro-diverse families face**

- Review eligibility criteria of assistance schemes , such as free school meals, to better meet the needs of neuro-diverse families, prioritising equity.
- Aim to further understand and address the barriers to financial wellbeing for ND families by engaging experts by experience and professionals.

# Poverty

## The Current Climate

**31%** of children in Wales are living in poverty and **more than half** of households in poverty have at least one child aged **0-4 yrs old**

**81%** of children in relative income poverty live in working households

**15%** of parents cited in Children in Wales' latest annual poverty survey said their children miss school because of costs

**19%** of people who are economically inactive report bad or very bad health

**11%** of parents surveyed by HSC said they don't have enough income to cover their essentials

**95%** of parents cited in Children in Wales' latest annual poverty survey feel their financial situation is negatively impacting their mental health

Around **1 in 10** children are materially deprived

**1 in 4** jobs pay below the minimum wage, and low-paid, part-time or insecure jobs are often **disproportionately taken up by women**

The Bevan Foundation reports a female worker with a child aged 2 and under, working full time at the 25th percentile of earnings must currently spend **more than half her weekly earnings** on the cost of childcare.

Most local authorities in Wales **exclude** children from free school meals and the School Essentials Grant because of their immigration status.

With statutory shared parental leave paying **less than half the minimum wage**, under **2%** of working Dads in the UK take shared parental leave despite **21%** reporting they want to take on more of the weight of childcare and household responsibilities.

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*"Even if there is a system that tells me clearly what I am eligible for, I may not be able to access it anyway as I don't drive and cant afford the bus.*

*Refugees can access free transport, but not asylum seekers."*

**-Nadia, Newport**

*"Things like the Healthy Start Vouchers do help, but, the truth is I'm struggling at the minute. We can't go on any holidays, or do activities with the kids. Even going to a family cinema I can't afford."*

**-Natasha, Caerphilly**

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## Our Key Calls to Policymakers

### Prioritise sustainable efforts to end child poverty in Wales

Despite historical efforts and strategies, child poverty rates are predicted to continue to rise if strong action is not taken.

- Implement a Welsh Benefits System for a simpler, accessible route to multi-layered support for families.
- Review the current childcare system to address serious accessibility and affordability challenges.
- Work closely with UK Government to represent ALL Welsh families interests, ensuring policies provide families with the full ability to thrive.
- Taking learning from Scottish Government, implement a Wales child payment.
- Prioritise investment in services and research that aims to address gaps in health and education caused by poverty, including preventative services that will work to close the developmental gap between children in and not in poverty at the start of their school journey.
- Review options for Welsh Government-led poverty alleviation schemes to ensure clarity on entitlements, with consideration of eligibility criteria expansion to support ALL families in need, including families with no recourse to public funds.
- Address the root causes of in work poverty and invest in reform to ensure employment is a practical and economic option for families that will improve their financial and overall wellbeing.



# About Home-Start Cymru

Home-Start Cymru walks alongside families across Wales during some of the most challenging moments in their lives. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and that begins with supporting parents and families to thrive.

Our volunteers and staff work directly with families in their own homes and communities, building trusting relationships that make real, lasting change possible. We regularly support thousands of families facing **isolation, mental health challenges, financial hardship, single parenthood** and the everyday challenges that can feel overwhelming when raising children.

What makes Home-Start Cymru unique is our whole-family approach. We don't see problems in isolation – we see families as complete systems where supporting one member strengthens everyone. Our volunteers bring both practical help and emotional support, meeting families where they are, without judgment, and helping them find their own strength and solutions.

Every day, we hear from families about the challenges they face – challenges that no parent should have to navigate alone. We hear about the impossible choices between heating and eating, the exhausting wait for a neurodivergence diagnosis while struggling to access support, the isolation of new fatherhood with nowhere to turn, and the cascade of crises that poverty creates in family life.

**These aren't abstract policy problems. They're the daily realities for families we support across Wales,** and they're the reason we've developed this vision based directly on what families tell us matters most.



**We're calling on the next Welsh Government to be bold. The evidence is clear. The solutions exist. What's needed now is the political will to make Wales a place where every family can not just survive, but genuinely thrive.**