

## **An overview of health problems in Wales & their impact on sustainable development**

The legacy of ill-health in Wales was set out in the *Better Health: Better Wales* consultation paper, published in 1998, which described the inequalities in health status within Wales and between Wales and other countries. This was re-emphasised more recently in the Chief Medical Officer's *Health Status Wales* Report (2005), which highlighted that:

- mortality rates in Wales are among the worst in Western Europe;
- death rates from heart disease in Wales, and the UK, are substantially higher than in many western European countries;
- Wales has amongst the highest rates of cancer registrations in Western Europe;
- Consistently poor health persists in the South Wales valleys - in 2000-2002 death rates in Merthyr Tydfil were almost 50% higher than in Ceredigion;
- Wales has a much higher percentage of people reporting a long term limiting illness than in England - with the highest levels in the South Wales valleys;
- mortality rates from cancers are worse in Wales than in England and Northern Ireland, although better than in Scotland;
- in the 2001 Census, the percentage in Wales reporting that their health was not good was 12%, compared to 9% for England, and all Welsh local authorities had rates above the English average

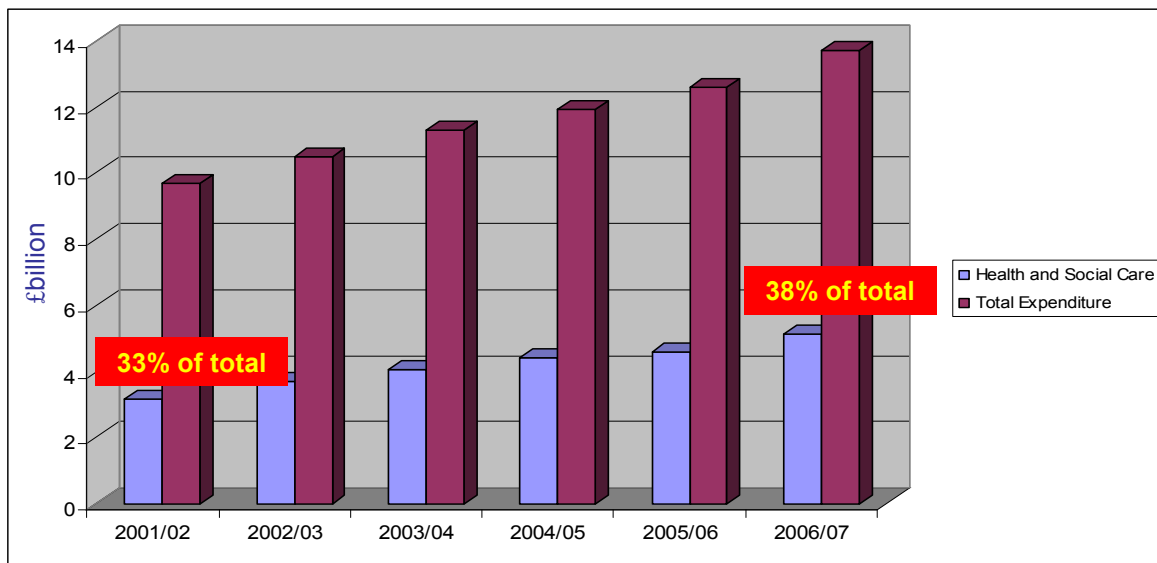
*So why is it that, in general, people in Wales suffer disproportionately high levels of poor health in comparison to other European countries?*

There are many multi-faceted and inter-related issues that determine an individual's state of health. The diagram in Annex 3 helps capture the complexity of these issues and helps demonstrate how they can interact to influence an individual's health and well-being. However, in short, people in Wales suffer disproportionately high levels of ill health due to the influence of the country's industrial history, high levels of poverty, poor diet and health damaging lifestyles.

This creates a growing problem. More and more resources are being invested in health and social care services and improvements in productivity have helped increase the supply and, in most cases, the quality of health and social care services across Wales. However, because the root causes of poor health remain relatively unchallenged the continuing cycle of ill health remains, resulting in more rapidly growing demand and an unsustainable healthcare service. The graph below demonstrates how the rising cost of health and social care services in Wales impacts on the overall budget of the Welsh Assembly Government (see overleaf)<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Time to Deliver. The Third Term & Beyond: Policy Options for Wales*, Institute of Welsh Affairs (2006)



To put the above figures into context, and to give an idea of the scale of public expenditure on health, the comparative total spend on environmental protection in 2004-2005 was approximately just £120 per head of population in comparison to £1,421 per head on health<sup>2</sup>.

*Does such a high level of poor health impact on Wales' long-term sustainable development goals?*

Clearly the cost of health and social care services in Wales places an incredible burden on the national government, the public purse and society as a whole. More crucially however, such high levels of poor health ultimately threaten to undermine long-term sustainable development in Wales through their adverse economic and social impacts.

As a result, any approach that aims to tackle the root causes of ill health must link with the underlying drivers that underpin the UK's sustainable development goals (see sustainable development diagram overleaf). It is useful, in the context of this paper, to think of the realisation of the UK's long-term sustainable development vision as the manifestation of four interdependent states:

- *Sustainable Economy* – balancing growth with the resources available; also equitable economic activity, that is geographically distributed (urban/rural), that generates jobs for local people; that invests for lasting prosperity.
- *Sustainable Health* – lower morbidity/mortality rates, sense of well-being, rather than focussed on ill health, reduction of health inequalities
- *Sustainable Communities* – generating social capital, encouraging work life balance, fostering communities of interest and of place

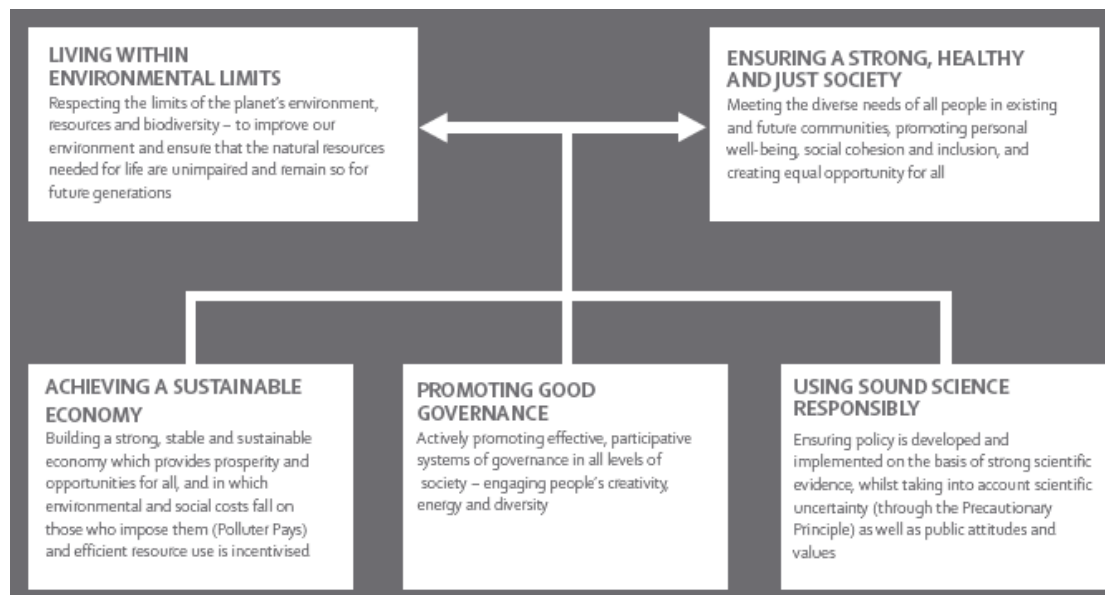
<sup>2</sup> *Time to Deliver. The Third Term & Beyond: Policy Options for Wales*, Institute of Welsh Affairs (2006)

- *Sustainable Environment* – effective use of natural and built environments within the planet’s overall resource capacity<sup>3</sup>.

The achievement of sustainable development should, therefore, form an integral part of the health improvement agenda in Wales and be more closely linked within the policy documentation to ensure broader understanding of the agenda and synergies through combining drivers for action.

Health is an integral part of the concept of sustainable development but it appears to have become separated in the minds of those who are devising and implementing strategies to achieve both long-term sustainable development and enhanced health and well-being.<sup>4</sup>

Joining these two agendas together will not only help achieve greater clarity of purpose and more “joined up” thinking in relation to policy creation and delivery but will, ultimately, also ensure that through collective action the people of Wales can enjoy a better quality of life without compromising the quality of life of future generations.<sup>5</sup>



The UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy – March 2005

<sup>3</sup> *Climates & Change: the urgent need to connect health & sustainable development* - the UK Public Health Association (2007)

<sup>4</sup> *Healthy People – Healthy Planet, A decade of progress in health and environment practice and policy in the UK*, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Sustainable Development Commission – Contribution to “Choosing Health”, Sustainable Development Commission (May 2004)





Parc Cenedlaethol Arfordir Penrhyn  
Pembrokeshire Coast National Park



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government