

Labour pledges more fruit and vegetables for children alongside new Wellbeing Act

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The Labour Party is today pledging to provide more fresh fruit and vegetables to poorer children as it announces plans for a Future Generations Wellbeing Act for England as part of a commitment to tackle widening health inequalities.

New figures released by the party today show that the number of women and children eligible to receive government 'Healthy Start' vouchers for healthy food and vitamins has fallen by 20 per cent in four years. Simultaneously, since 2012/13, funding for healthy start welfare food payments has been slashed by £36.6 million – just over a quarter.

Healthy Start vouchers are crucial in helping children from lower income families – who are at greater risk of obesity – get their five-a-day of fruit and vegetables. One in five children are obese or overweight by the time they start primary school, rising to one in three by the time they leave.

Speaking at the Fabian Society's Summer Conference, Jonathan Ashworth MP, Labour's Shadow Health and Social Care Secretary will today commit £26.8 million to the 'Healthy Start' programme to help provide children in the most deprived areas of the country with fresh fruit and vegetables.

That is the equivalent of an extra 42.4 million pints of milk, plus 33 million apples, 6.5 million kg of carrots and 4.3 million kg of peas for the very poorest children.

The measure is the latest announcement as part of Labour's strategy to improve health and wellbeing alongside a commitment in government to a new "Future Generation's Wellbeing Act" for England. Following the lead

of Welsh Labour, who implemented a Wellbeing Act, Labour envisages the Act will place duties on health services, public bodies in England and government to take account of population health and wellbeing, now and in the future, when making their decisions.

Labour will consult on the act which will:

- Enshrine a 'health in all policies' approach ensuring a 'health equality audit' of all government decisions;
- Enshrine meaningful high-level national standards for population health and health inequalities including commitments on ensuring life expectancy and health life expectancy match the best of our international peers and that children enjoy the best health and wellbeing outcomes possible;
- Place a new duty on local health services to reduce health inequalities, while ensuring public health services are fully funded and budgets ring fenced;
- Connect health services with Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring the NHS plays its part in tackling climate change;
- Recognises the NHS as an 'economic anchor' institution in communities and ensure it maximises the social value of local spending decisions.

Speaking at the Fabian Society's Summer Conference, Jonathan Ashworth MP will say:

"Today a baby girl born in Liverpool can expect to live 13 fewer years in good health than a baby girl born in Richmond. It's an injustice we cannot ignore.

"After nine years of Tory austerity, advances in life expectancy have ground to halt, and even gone backwards in some of the poorest areas. Shamefully, infant mortality rates – children dying before their first birthday – have risen three years in a row for the first time since the Second World War.

"Rates of premature deaths – including deaths linked to heart disease, lung cancers and COPD – are two times higher in the most deprived areas of England compared to the most affluent. While children and adults living in the poverty are up to three times more likely to develop mental health problems compared to those living in the highest income brackets.

“Poverty and deprivation mean people get ill quicker and die sooner. As socialists we should never settle for this, as Health Secretary I won’t.

“The next Labour government will adopt a comprehensive, cross-government national strategy to tackle health inequalities, attacking the wider determinants of ill health and putting prevention first.

“We will focus determinedly on improving the health and wellbeing of every child, ensuring children have access to nutritious food not just in schools but also by expanding Healthy Start. Labour will ensure the poorest children receive the milk, fruit and vegetables they need.

“And to guarantee government decisions fully take account of long term health impacts, we will introduce a Future Generations Wellbeing Act drawing upon best practice including in New Zealand and closer to home in Wales.

“It will mean local health services, alongside relevant public bodies, will always act to reduce health inequalities and promote overall wellbeing too. It will mean our NHS, as a local ‘economic anchor’ institution in communities, takes account of the social value of every pound spent and takes its obligations to climate change seriously.

“Our health policy will be driven not just by a focus on cure but on radically improving prevention and social wellbeing too. Our commitment is to help people live longer, happier, healthier lives.”