

Chapter 2 Give every child the best start in life

A good start in life is at the heart of a happy childhood. Every young person should be given the opportunity to achieve their potential and grow up well-prepared for the challenges of adolescence and adulthood. Parental aspiration and support to motivate and encourage their children is critically important. Early interventions during pregnancy and ongoing support in the early years are fundamental to the long-term health of the child. Early years prevention is vitally important for improving health, reducing health inequalities and promoting educational engagement and attainment at all ages. Interventions later in life are less effective where early foundations are lacking. For this reason The Marmot Review highlighted the following priorities:

- *Reduce inequalities in the early development of physical and emotional health, and cognitive, linguistic and social skills*
- *Ensure high-quality maternity services, parenting programmes, childcare and early years education to meet need across the social gradient*
- *Build the resilience and wellbeing of young children across the social gradient*

This chapter of the JSNA reflects the importance of wellbeing in the early years, describing key indicators and early interventions in Walsall aimed at reducing inequalities in later life. Appendix 2 of this document uses various indicators to provide an overview of health and wellbeing of Walsall children and how they compare with England.

Birth rates across Walsall have risen in recent years. While infant mortality rates have declined across England as a whole, the rates in Walsall remain higher than regional and national rates and give significant cause for concern. Measures to address infant mortality rates will include a focus on reducing teenage conceptions, including repeat conceptions, housing overcrowding, smoking in pregnancy – particularly amongst pregnant teenagers – and child poverty. Babies who are not breastfed are five times more likely to be admitted to hospital with gastroenteritis, and they are more likely to become overweight or obese in later childhood.

Different patterns of birth rates between deprived and affluent areas mean that more children are living in areas of deprivation than five years ago. Children who grow up in poverty are less likely to aspire and stay on at school, to attend school regularly, to get qualifications or go on to higher education and more likely to become young parents – locking whole families into inter-generational cycles of deprivation. This is particularly relevant in Walsall where there are high levels of child poverty. This has severe and lifelong adverse effects on health and wellbeing.