

Tackling UK ill health is vital to economic growth, says IPPR

Larry Elliott, *The Guardian*, 17 September, 2024

Tackling Britain's growing ill-health crisis holds the key to increasing growth and the government needs to invest £15bn a year on a radical programme of reforms designed to improve wellbeing and national prosperity, a left-of-centre thinktank has said.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) said the UK's worsening health was affecting the supply of workers, worsening productivity, holding back pay, damaging the public finances and adding to regional inequality.

The final report of the thinktank's three-year commission on health and prosperity said the 900,000 people lost to the labour force since the pandemic would cost HMRC¹ £5bn in lost revenue this year, while better health would save the government £18bn a year by the mid-2030s.

The IPPR said: "The term the 'sick man of Europe' is often used to describe countries going through severe economic turmoil or social unrest. In Britain today, it has become a more literal reality.

"We lag our peers on health outcomes, the number of people with a long-term condition is rising, and people are spending longer proportions of their lives in poor health."

The report—welcomed by the health and social care secretary, Wes Streeting—called for:

- higher taxes on tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food companies to raise more than £10bn a year by the end of the parliament.
- free school meals for all primary schoolchildren, the scrapping of the two-child benefit limit and the restoration of the Sure Start programme of family support.
- the creation of health and prosperity improvement zones with new powers and national investment to rebuild local health infrastructure—such as swimming pools and green spaces—in the most health-deprived areas.
- a "right to try" for people on health or disability benefits—a government commitment to a new and guaranteed period where people in receipt of benefits can "try" work with no risk to welfare status or award level.
- a new "neighbourhood health centre" in every part of the country: a one-stop shop for diagnostics, primary care, mental health and public health with a focus on prevention.

The report said the UK should aim to move from a reactive, sickness-oriented 20th century healthcare system into a proactive 21st-century system designed to improve health, working in parallel to the "sickness service" provided by the NHS.

Of the leading industrial nations in the G7, the UK ranked sixth for life expectancy, health spending and avoidable mortality, and fifth for children living in relative poverty. More than a quarter of people were obese, six times higher than in Japan.

"The UK is experiencing a sharp rise in the prevalence of many long-term conditions", the report said. "This is not solely about population ageing: indeed, children, teenagers and working age people are also getting sicker, as well as people in retirement."

The goal for a new "health creation" system would be to add 10 years to healthy life expectancy by 2055 and to halve regional health inequalities, the report said.

Streeting said he had "valued engaging closely" with the IPPR's commission and he wanted to make the Department of Health and Social Care improve economic growth, "because we won't build a healthy economy without a healthy society".

According to the IPPR report, if current trends continue, economic inactivity caused by sickness could hit 4.3 million by the end of this parliament, up from 2.8 million now.

Dame Sally Davies, a former chief medical officer for England and Wales, and a co-chair of the IPPR's commission, said: "I have long argued that better health is Britain's greatest, untapped resource for happiness, economic growth and national prosperity.

"This commission has now provided the irrefutable evidence that this is true. A government that wants to deliver growth, sustainable public services and fairness throughout Britain needs to take note."

¹ His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (the British tax department)