



Anger as UK drops health disparities plans

The UK Government has admitted it is dropping its health disparities legislation, disappointing medical and health bodies. Jacqui Thornton reports.

Published Online

February 2, 2023

[https://doi.org/10.1016/](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)00235-0)

[S0140-6736\(23\)00235-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)00235-0)

For a **Health Foundation** blog on the disappearance of the white paper see <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/the-health-disparities-white-paper-disappearing-shows-a-dangerous-pattern>

For the **Inequalities in Health Alliance** statement see <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/over-155-organisations-urge-health-and-social-care-secretary-publish-health-disparities-white>

For more on the **Marmot Review** see <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/marmot-review-10-years-on>

In 2021, the UK Government announced its flagship levelling up plan, which was hoped to support jobs, businesses, and economic growth. Medical and academic bodies said that health must be included for the strategy to work and Sajid Javid, then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, seemed on board.

During a speech in Blackpool he said: “We can only level up economically if we level up in terms of health too.” The Health Foundation later said that it felt at the time like the levelling up programme was the best chance in years for the Government to put action to address health inequalities at the heart of its agenda. The Levelling Up White Paper—the precursor to legislation—that was published in February, 2022, did not have enough detail to persuade experts that health was being adequately addressed. However, a new health disparities white paper was planned, which Javid said in May was due to be published shortly.

But in September, after he had resigned from the Government amidst political turmoil, rumours emerged that the new Health Secretary Thérèse Coffey planned to scrap the plans. The Inequalities in Health Alliance, convened by the Royal College of Physicians, sent a letter with 155 signatories asking Coffey to stand by the commitment.

Those representations have gone unheeded. Last week, when the Health Secretary Steve Barclay announced a new “major conditions strategy”, the demise of the health disparities white paper was quietly revealed in an answer to a parliamentary question in the House of Commons. The immediate reaction has ranged from anger to disappointment and sadness that the singular focus on this important issue was lost.

Many pointed to the fact that health inequalities are estimated to cost the National Health Service (NHS) £4.8 billion a year and that Office for National Statistics figures show that since early 2020, almost 400 000 people left the workforce with long-term health problems. Martin McKee, President of the British Medical Association, the doctors’ representative organisation, and Professor of European Public Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (London, UK), said that the decision was “appalling”. He added: “The replacement major conditions strategy should be welcomed if it leads to improved treatment for people already experiencing ill health. But we also desperately need a plan to stop people getting ill in the first place. With half a million more people out of the labour force because of long-term sickness since 2019, how can the Government drop a plan for health inequalities in the same breath as promising economic growth?”

Camilla Kingdon, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said that the replacement policy was “truly disappointing”. She said: “We have yet another plan to publish a strategy when what we really need is urgent action. The Government knows there is a problem, yet we still have no clear strategy that considers the role of every department and every available policy in tackling health inequalities.”

David Buck is a Senior Fellow at The King’s Fund, and was previously Deputy Director for Health Inequalities at the Department of Health. He said that the white paper was expected to be a critical part of the Government’s plans to address health inequalities through a coherent cross-Government approach, which his organisation has long called for. He said: “Dropping [the white

paper] is the latest example of repeated political failure to tackle the widening inequalities that leave thousands of people suffering and dying earlier than they need to.”

The Health Foundation said that the decision has removed all the remaining momentum behind the health inequalities agenda. Gwen Nightingale, Assistant Director for Healthy Lives at the Foundation told *The Lancet* that it was “concerning and short-sighted” that the Government was weakening its approach when good health remains out of reach for so many, and inequalities in health are growing. “History shows that combining the activity needed to keep people healthy for longer into a medical strategy will result in a bias towards action on early diagnosis and treatment within the National Health Service”, she said.

Sir Michael Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology at University College London (UCL) and Director of the UCL Institute of Health Equity, was not surprised by the decision. He said that in one sense the decision to drop the health disparities white paper was quite consistent with the Government’s actions. His 2020 Marmot Review documented how health inequalities increased in the decade from 2010, most likely as a result of the Government’s policies of austerity.

“Whether it was increasing child poverty, reducing per pupil spend on education, cutting local Government spending in a regressive way, or failing to keep National Health Service spending rising in line with historic trends, the actions Government took went in the wrong direction”, Marmot said. “A disparities white paper would have to have pushed back on these policies. It was always unlikely.”

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