

# Developing a Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the United Kingdom – a progress update

**Alexander C Capleton, Raquel Duarte-Davidson and Gary Coleman**  
WHO Collaborating Centre, Chemical Hazards and Poisons  
Division

**Tina Endericks**  
Chief Executive's Office, Health Protection Agency  
email: [cehape@hpa.org.uk](mailto:cehape@hpa.org.uk)

## Summary

The Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the UK is now out for public consultation and will be revised in due course in light of the comments received. As a wide range of initiatives and existing policies are already in place that address many environments and health concerns relevant to children, the strategy builds on and complements policies and activities already undertaken by government departments, devolved administrations, local and regional authorities and the National Health Service. The strategy makes recommendations on the measures necessary to improve children's environmental health and should help encourage a comprehensive strategic approach to protecting and improving children's health and well-being in the UK.

## Introduction

Children and young people can be particularly vulnerable to the adverse health consequences arising from exposure to environmental hazards (WHO, 2005). This is because they

- are still growing and developing, which can mean that certain biological systems may be more susceptible to harm from environmental hazards than adults and that immunity to disease is not as well developed
- often experience different patterns and levels of exposure to environmental hazards because they take in more food, water and air relative to their body weight than adults, consume a different diet (particularly when very young) and can absorb some chemicals more readily than adults and
- can be more vulnerable to unintentional injuries due to their tendency for exploratory behaviour, play and their maturity and ability to judge risks

To address children's vulnerability from environmental hazards, the European Environment and Health Process, led by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe, provides support to the 53 WHO Europe member states (including the United Kingdom; UK) as they plan and implement national and international environment and health policies. In 2004, WHO member states signed the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE; WHO, 2004) which commits them to the development of national plans to address four Regional Priority Goals covering (i) water, sanitation and health; (ii) injuries, obesity and physical activity; (iii) indoor and outdoor air pollution; and (iv) chemical, physical and biological hazards.

The Health Protection Agency has been commissioned by the Department of Health, on behalf of the Interdepartmental Steering Group on Environment and Health to develop a Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the UK. This article provides an update on progress and outlines some of the areas highlighted in the strategy. An earlier paper (Duarte-Davidson *et al.*, 2007) provides further background material on the project.

## The burden of disease in children and young people in the UK

The impact that the environment has on children's health should be considered as part of the broader burden of disease in children. Children and young people (aged 0 to 19 years) represent about a quarter of the population in the UK and generally experience a high standard of health. Currently, there are about 5,000 deaths each year amongst children under 14 years of age (out of approximately 750,000 births) and the main causes of death are due to congenital malformations, neoplasms, injuries and poisonings (HPA, 2008). The main causes for admission to hospital and visits to General Practitioners include respiratory tract infections and asthma, injuries, poisonings and intestinal infectious disease (HPA, 2008). Whilst the burden of disease attributable to environmental factors amongst children and young people is difficult to quantify, environmental factors can have an influence on many of the causes of ill health and therefore provide an opportunity to further protect and improve children's health.

## Progress to date

An in-depth assessment of the current status of children's environment and health in the UK was undertaken during 2006/7 (HPA, 2007). The assessment aimed to identify areas where further action may be necessary to better protect children's health from environmental hazards. This was used as a basis for developing the Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the UK (HPA, 2008). The strategy aims to provide recommendations on the measures necessary to improve children's health by effectively managing environment-related influences on child health and provide a coherent and coordinated cross-government approach. Some of the areas for improvement highlighted in the strategy are summarised in Box 1.

This strategy will work alongside other policies and initiatives (see HPA, 2007 and 2008 for further details) with the aim to provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to ensuring children in the UK experience the highest attainable levels of health. Within England and the Devolved Administrations, the strategy will help set an overarching context whilst allowing a degree of flexibility within each administrative region.

### Box 1 Areas for improvement highlighted in the strategy

The challenge for the UK is that, whilst the legislative base on public health has been well developed and the baseline in most Regional Priority Goals is very good, there are specific areas that could still benefit from improvement. Examples include:

- Counteracting the increasing number of overweight and obese children and young adults, coupled with improving the amount of physical activity they undertake.
- Addressing concerns regarding the number of children whose asthma is affected by air pollution and the effects of air pollution on the long-term lung function of children.
- Promoting good sun protection behaviour amongst children to prevent skin cancer.
- Reducing unintentional poisonings amongst children.
- Gaining a better understanding of environmental inequalities and the disproportionate burden of disease experienced by children in lower socioeconomic groups so that appropriate interventions can be effectively targeted to ensure the needs of these children are adequately addressed.

### The Consultation process

The Children's Environment and Health Strategy is currently out for public consultation (see figure 1). The aim of the consultation process is to seek feedback from interested parties on the proposed recommendations, areas for further action and identify other areas that may require action in order to meet the UK's commitment to the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe. The consultation document and questionnaire can be found on the HPA website (<http://www.hpa.org.uk/cehape/>) or are available on request from the Consultation Officer (email: [cehape@hpa.org.uk](mailto:cehape@hpa.org.uk)). The consultation is running for a period of three months ending 13 June 2008.

### Next steps

Following the consultation, responses will be collated, summarised and published. In light of the responses received, the strategy will be revised and recommendations will be made on the most appropriate measures necessary to further improve children's environmental health in the UK.

At the next WHO Regional Office for Europe Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (to be held in Italy in 2009) the UK will have to report on the progress made towards developing and implementing our national children's environment and health action plan.

### Acknowledgements

The Health Protection Agency gratefully acknowledges the Department of Health and the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) for funding this work. We also gratefully acknowledge the input of the Interdepartmental Steering Group on Environment and Health for providing advice, comments and assistance throughout this project.

### References

- Duarte-Davidson R, Capleton AC, O'Connell S, Wyke S, Endericks T & Coleman G (2007) Developing a Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the United Kingdom. *Chemical Hazards and Poisons Report*, 10, 40–41.
- HPA (2007) Children's Environment and Health Action Plan. A Summary of Current Activities which Address Children's Environment and Health Issues within the UK. Chilton, UK, Health Protection Agency.
- HPA (2008) A Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the United Kingdom. Consultation Document (see <http://www.hpa.org.uk/cehape/>).
- WHO (2004) *Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe*. Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, Budapest, Hungary, 23–25 June 2004.
- WHO (2005) *Children's Health and the Environment. Developing Action Plans*. Geneva, Switzerland, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

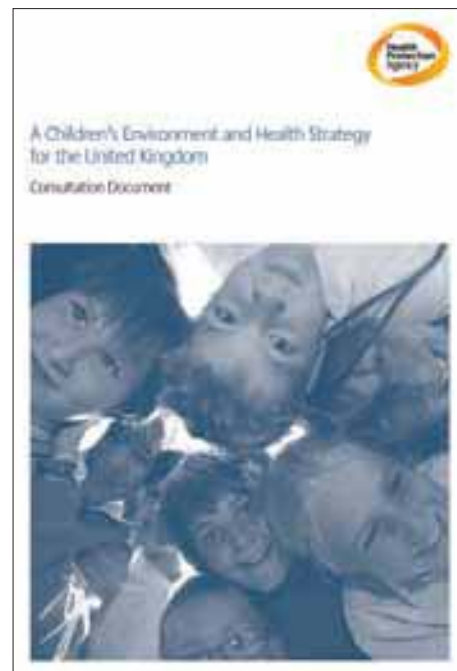


Figure 1: Cover of Children's Environment and Health Strategy