Policy brief
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Making Welsh primary schools Sunproofed

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Background

The UK population has at least a 1 in 5 chance of developing skin cancer.

Wales has the highest skin cancer rates of the UK nations, and rates are increasing by ~8% annually.

While severe sunburn as a youngster more than doubles the chance of developing future skin cancer, the risk of skin cancer can be substantially mitigated with safer behaviours in the sun.

The World Health Organisation recommends a comprehensive approach to sun safety in schools as the cornerstone to skin cancer prevention.

In England schools' physical health and mental wellbeing statutory guidance requires that pupils at the end of primary school (Year 6) know about safe and unsafe sun exposure, and how to reduce the risk of sun damage, including skin cancer.

In Wales, sun safety is recommended as part of Public Health Wales' Welsh Network for Healthy Schools Scheme, but this is not enforced.

The Sunproofed[1] study is the most recent and comprehensive assessment of the landscape for sun safety in Welsh primary schools.

Policy Context

In 2012, the National Assembly's Children and Young People's Committee inquiry into sun protection in schools produced 6 recommendations.

Ten years on, Sunproofed's survey of all primary schools in Wales[2,3] found that at least 3 of these recommendations have not been implemented:

1. Recommendation: As part of schools' broader health and safety policy, they should be required to have a document which sets out the school's approach to a range of environmental factors which might affect children during the school day, including sun protection and shade requirements, and wet or cold weather.

2. Recommendation: Consideration should be given to the equipment provided to, and the school uniform requirements for, children in the Foundation Phase to ensure that they are suitably protected to be outside in a range of weather conditions.

3. Recommendation: The Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, schools and third sector organisations should continue to work together to deliver sun protection education to children.

Current sun safety issues in Welsh primary schools

1. **Lack of school sun safety policies.** Less than half (39%) of responding schools had a sun safety policy and of these only 82% enforced their policies. There were also **inequalities in which schools had policies:** schools with higher percentages of children on free school meals were less likely to have a policy, whereas schools in North Wales and Welsh medium schools were more likely.
2. **Lack of shade equipment and sun safe school uniform requirements.** Only 5% of schools had sufficient shade for most active outdoor pursuits and only 8% of schools include sun protective hats as part of the school uniform.
3. **Lack of sun safety education.**
    a. *Pupil Education:* Less than a third of schools (29%) teach sun safety as part of the curriculum in every year group. Only 5.7% of pupils were aware that sun protection is needed when the UV index reaches '3' and only 36% knew they could get sunburnt on a cloudy day.
    b. *Schools:* There is also a **lack of awareness of the role schools can play in sun safety** with reasons for not having a policy including 'not aware of the need' (34.6%); 'need assistance with policy or procedure development' (30.3%); and 'not got around to it just yet' (26.8%). Less than 20% of schools include sun protection guidance in their staff manuals.

Specific implications for educational policy and practice

The Well Being of Future Generations Wales Act highlights the importance of prevention and focuses on the Well-being Goals of 'A Healthier and A More Equal' Wales. Yet Wales has the highest skin cancer rates of all UK nations and with no public health focus or strategy on skin cancer prevention Sunproofed's findings have several implications for educational policy and practice:

1. **Lack of sun safety policies.** Research shows those living in areas of greater deprivation and/or from lower socio-economic groups have more limited sun protection knowledge, show riskier sun behaviours, and experience disproportionately high melanoma mortality rates. Not having clear plans for addressing unequal sun safety provision across Wales could potentially be contributing to these existing inequalities.
2. **Lack of shade and school uniform requirements.** Additional Sunproofed study findings have indicated widespread confusion concerning school sunscreen application practices with no set standard for Wales. And with schools constrained by time and resources, research participants in Sunproofed reported a need to look beyond sunscreen to other methods of protection, many of which are currently overlooked.
3. **Lack of sun safety education.** Primary schools can play a key role in promoting healthier behaviours and within the new Curriculum, can support children to become 'healthy, confident individuals.' Skin cancer is one of the most preventable forms of cancer, but both schools and pupils need stronger education for skin cancer rates to come down.

Key Recommendations

Enabling both the education of sun safety in schools and reinforcing the need for a formal sun safety policy are ways in which Wales can move towards reducing future skin cancer. Based on Sunproofed study findings and current available resources, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Provide primary schools with a consistent sun safety policy template to eliminate inequalities in provision

a. The charity Skcin has developed a free, comprehensive annual accreditation scheme, which includes the development of a sun protection policy. Resources should be committed to translating this scheme into Welsh to improve uptake across Wales. https://www.sunsafeschools.co.uk/
b. Within Sunproofed, we co-produced a set of evidence-based sun safety guidelines which will soon be piloted in a small number of primary schools in South Wales. Further research is required to evaluate these guidelines.

2. Explore uniform and shade requirements

With the cost-of-living crisis, and confusion and constraints around sunscreen application, further research is required to understand the barriers to including sun protective hats as part of the school uniform and to identify the most cost-effective options for lasting shade.

3. Create a Health and Well-being Curriculum Toolkit for Sun Safety

a. Public Health Wales have recently completed a Vaping Toolkit consisting of Teacher Guidance, Knowledge Banks and Classroom Activities, a format which would complement the sun safety resources schools need. https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/supporting-the-health-and-wellbeing-area-of-learning-and-experience-in-schools/
b. There are also sun safety resources available on the Sunproofed website which have shown a positive impact on pupil knowledge. These should be further developed incorporating children's feedback, translated, and integrated into the Toolkit or into the Hwb to be accessible by all. https://swanseatrialsunit.org/trials/sunproofed-a-mixed-methods-scoping-study-of-sun-safety-policies-in-primary-schools-in-wales

4. Support further research to develop an objective measure to understand the effectiveness of any sun safety policies on pupil's knowledge, behaviour and health outcomes.

To identify and share sun safety best practices across schools, an objective outcome measure is needed. This measure will help understand which interventions are most likely to improve health and reduce health inequalities, saving valuable time and resources.

About Sunproofed

Sunproofed was a Health and Care Research Wales funded study which completed in October 2023. The study explored sun safety in primary schools, establishing the research agenda for this area in Wales. Survey findings are from an online multiple-choice survey to all 1241 primary schools in Wales and have been peer-reviewed. In total 471 (38%) schools responded. The profile of responding schools generally matched those of nonresponding schools providing confidence that findings are generalisable to all primary schools in Wales. Pupil quiz results were from 568 quizzes completed by Years 3-6 in 5 case study schools in South Wales.

Public Involvement

We would thank our public involvement partners who contributed to Sunproofed and the busy primary schools in Wales who responded to our survey.

"[We] request a generic template that all schools use and adopt to be compliant with guidance and research. A consistent LA/All Wales policy is needed to avoid differences in interpretation."

Head teacher, school in Cardiff, via the Sunproofed School Survey

References

1. Peconi J, et al (2022). Sunproofed study protocol: A mixed-methods scoping study of sun safety policies in primary schools in Wales. https://doi.org/10.1093/ced/llad458
2. Peconi J, et al (2024) **Are Welsh primary schools Sunproofed? Results of a national survey Part 1: Scoping the landscape of sun safety policies in Wales.** https://doi.org/10.1093/ced/llae218
3. Abbott RA, et al. **Are Welsh primary schools Sunproofed? Results of a national survey, part 2: sun protection practices in primary schools in Wales.** https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0268141

Further information

https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241590629
https://www.sunsafeschools.co.uk/ (Skcin's sun safe schools accreditation scheme)
https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/supporting-the-health-and-wellbeing-area-of-learning-and-experience-in-schools/
https://swanseatrialsunit.org/trials/sunproofed-a-mixed-methods-scoping-study-of-sun-safety-policies-in-primary-schools-in-wales
https://swanseatrialsunit.org/trials/sunchat-sun-safety-conversations-about-healthy-attitudes-to-tanning-exploring-perceptions-of-school-children-ad-their-parents-carers
https://swanseatrialsunit.org/trials/sunview-how-the-sun-sees-you