

Why did the government try to improve the nation's health after 1900?

Before the two world wars, the British fought a war in southern Africa called the Boer War (1899–1902). However, at the time around 40 per cent of the men who volunteered to fight were too unhealthy to be soldiers. In some big cities, 90 per cent of men weren't fit enough! This worried not only army leaders but also the British government too. But within five years of the end of the Boer War, the government had begun to introduce reforms aimed at getting Britain fitter and healthier – including free school meals for Britain's poorest children, school medical inspections, and a National Insurance Act which gave people the right to free medical treatment. So how exactly did the Boer War lead to free school meals? And what impact did the changes have on Britain's citizens?

The Boer War

In 1899, a large-scale army recruitment campaign took place to find men to fight in the Boer War. But army chiefs were alarmed by the fact that 40 out of every 100 young men who volunteered were unfit to be soldiers – and the army didn't have particularly high entry standards either! The government was also shocked, so it set up a special committee to enquire into the 'Physical Deterioration of the People'. In 1904, the committee released its report. Among the many conclusions was the acknowledgement that many men were failing to get into the army because they led such unhealthy lives.

Fact

In the Boer War, the British and the Boers (descendants of Dutch settlers in Africa) competed for control of land in southern Africa.

The reports of Booth and Rowntree

Around the same time, several special investigations into the lives of the poor started to make headlines. For example, reports by Charles Booth, called *Life and Labour of the People in London*, found that around 30 per cent of Londoners were so poor that they didn't have enough

money to eat properly, despite having full-time jobs. He demonstrated that there was a link between poverty and a high death rate.

In York, Seebohm Rowntree's *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (1901) found that 28 per cent of the population did not have the minimum amount of money to live on at some time of their life. This fuelled fears that the unhealthy state of Britain's workers could lead to the decline of the country as a great industrial power. Germany, for example, which had a good system of state welfare for workers, was beginning to produce as much coal, iron and steel as Britain.

These reports, and the Boer War itself, highlighted the fact that poverty and poor health had become one

SOURCE A An extract from Rowntree's *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (1901):

These children presented a pathetic sight; all bore some mark of the hard conditions against which they were struggling. Puny and feeble bodies, dirty and often sadly insufficient clothing, sore eyes, in many cases acutely inflamed through continued want of attention, filthy heads, cases of hip disease, swollen glands – all these and other signs told a tale of neglect.

Objectives

- ▶ Explore how and why public health was improved after 1900.
- ▶ Outline the Liberal social reforms of 1906 onwards in relation to poverty and housing in Britain.
- ▶ Assess the importance of Booth, Rowntree and the Boer War.

of the big issues of the time. They came at a time when more people were beginning to feel that one of the key responsibilities of any government was to look after people who can't look after themselves. Some politicians, including many from the Liberal Party (including Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George), believed that direct action from the government was the way to improve the public health, welfare and productivity of the nation. They were also worried about the popularity of the Labour Party, which had been founded in 1900, so they wanted measures that would appeal to working people and stop them voting for Labour. In 1906, the Liberal Party won the general election, and set to work.

The Liberal social reforms

School meals

In 1906, the School Meals Act allowed local councils to provide school meals, with poor children getting a free meal. By 1914, over 158,000 children were having a free school meal every day. However, lack of food was only part of the problem.

THIS WEEK'S MENU

- Monday:** Tomato soup – Currant roly-poly pudding
- Tuesday:** Meat pudding – Rice pudding
- Wednesday:** Yorkshire pudding, gravy, peas – Rice pudding and sultanas
- Thursday:** Vegetable soup – Currant pastry or fruit tart
- Friday:** Stewed fish, parsley sauce, peas, mashed potato – Blancmange

B Bradford was the first city to offer free school meals. They were introduced at a time when research showed that a poor child was, on average, nine centimetres shorter than a rich one.

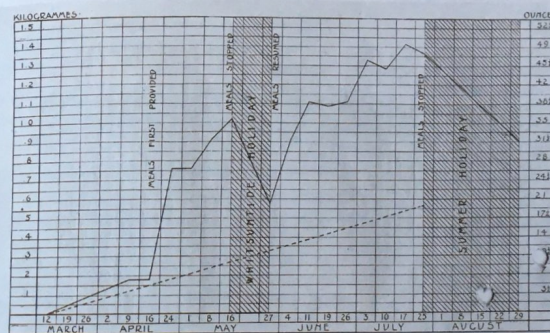


CHART ILLUSTRATING THE AVERAGE GAIN OR LOSS IN WEIGHT-DURING THE INTERVALS SHOWN-OF THE CHILDREN WHO WERE FED. THE BROKEN LINE SHOWS THE AVERAGE INCREASE IN WEIGHT-DURING THE SAME TIME-OF THE CONTROL CHILDREN. 1907

SOURCE C This graph from 1907 shows the impact of the free school meals; it charts the weight children gained (and lost) during part of the school year

Work

- 1 In what ways did the following affect the way the government felt about the health and welfare of British citizens: the Boer War, Charles Booth's report, Seebohm Rowntree's report, Germany.
- 2 Look at the menu in B.
 - a Why were menus like this introduced in schools in the early 1900s?
 - b Write down at least two reasons why many viewed this as a healthy menu.
- 3 In what ways have modern governments today tried to improve the eating habits of young people at school?
 - a What effect did providing meals have on the weight of the children?
 - b What happened to the weight of the children during the holidays?
 - c What is the dotted line – and why does the dotted line go up?

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Children's health

In 1907, the government told all councils that they should have a school medical service. At first, doctors examined the children and then parents paid for treatment. When lots of parents failed to follow through with treatment – because they couldn't afford it – the government paid for school clinics to be set up with free treatment.

Other measures continued to help children. The Children and Young Person's Act of 1908, for example, made children into 'protected persons', which meant that parents were breaking the law if they neglected their children.

SOURCE D A school doctor consulting a mother during a medical examination of her young son, London 1911



The school system was also seen as a way of improving children's health and well being. From 1907, special schools were set up to teach young women about the benefits of breastfeeding, hygiene and childcare.

Poverty and housing

After helping children, the government moved onto other sections of society. A National Insurance Act introduced unemployment benefit ('the dole'), free medical treatment and sickness pay. Old Age Pensions were introduced and Britain's first job centres were built.

SOURCE E Adapted excerpt from the Children and Young Person's Act, 1908. This was nicknamed 'The Children's Charter', and laid down in law many of the things that still protect children today:

Children are 'protected persons': parents can be prosecuted if they neglect or are cruel to them.

Inspectors are to regularly visit any children who have been neglected in the past.

All children's homes are to be regularly inspected.

Youth courts and young offenders' homes are to be set up to keep young criminals away from older ones.

Children under 14 are not allowed into pubs.

Shopkeepers cannot sell cigarettes to anyone under 16.

Over the next 30 years, successive governments continued to take measures to improve the welfare of Britain's citizens. The building of overcrowded back-to-back housing was banned, for example, so fewer people would have to live in the crowded, filthy, disease-ridden slums. In 1918, local councils had to provide **health visitors**, clinics for pregnant women, and day nurseries. A year later, councils began to build new houses for poorer families and, by 1930, a huge slum clearance programme began, finally clearing away the breeding grounds of so much disease.

Impact of social reforms on public health

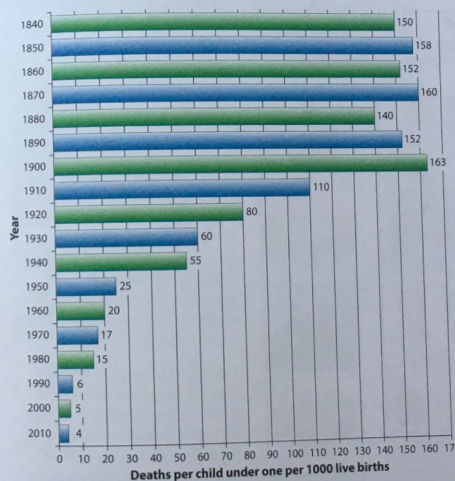
Gradually, during the twentieth century, infant mortality began to drop. A further boost to children's welfare was given in the 1940s with the introduction of the National Health Service (NHS). So, in today's world, health care begins before a baby is born: a pregnant woman will get free treatment and advice at antenatal clinics, and all hospital care and nursing are free. When the baby is born, it receives cheap milk, food and vitamins if

required; then a free education, cheap (or free) school meals, dental treatment and eye care. And if a child has any need that requires a special school, for example if they are blind or deaf, this costs the parents nothing. In 2015, the infant mortality rate in the UK was 4.2 per 1000: meaning that for every one thousand babies born, fewer than five die before they are one year old.

Extension

Health issues are major news items. What topics related to health have been in this week's newspapers or TV news broadcasts?

SOURCE F A bar graph showing infant mortality in Britain, 1840–2010



Practice Question

Explain the significance of the Liberal social reforms for the prevention of disease. **8 marks**

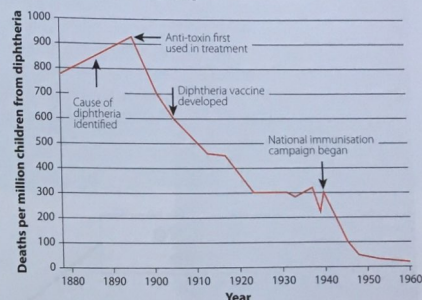
Study Tip

Refer to different groups of people at the time and how the reforms relate to the NHS.

Key Word

health visitor

SOURCE G A line graph showing the effect of a 1940 government campaign to get all children immunised against diphtheria; this disease causes a fever that makes sufferers short of breath, and it killed many children in the nineteenth century



Work

- 1 Apart from the introduction of school meals, how else were children helped in the early 1900s?
- 2 Study **Source F**. In pairs or in groups, discuss why the infant mortality rate dropped between 1900 and 1945. You may want to review what you learned about the impact of the two world wars (pages 72–75) to help you with the discussion.
- 3 Look at **Source G**. Why do you think a national immunisation campaign for diphtheria was started in 1940?