

# Wellbeing Communities

Delivering good mental health for all

## About the Mental Health Foundation

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK-wide charity with a dedicated presence in Scotland.

### Prevention is at the heart of what we do.

Our vision is good mental health for all. Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

For further information about the Mental Health Foundation, visit [mentalhealth.org.uk](http://mentalhealth.org.uk) or email [publicaffairs@mentalhealth.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@mentalhealth.org.uk)

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## Will you choose good mental health for your community?

Our mental health is determined by our environments and life experiences. Our local authorities make choices every day that impact on the wellbeing of tens of thousands of people. Local councillors have the power to influence decisions which will create safe, healthy communities that enable people to thrive. If elected, will you support actions that build wellbeing communities for all?

### ACTIONS

1. Adopt a 'mental health in all policies' approach to cross-departmental working at local councils.
2. Commit to transformational investment in community-based groups.
3. Engage with local communities to develop naturally diverse, safe, and accessible public green space.
4. Ensure all children and young people in the community have access to a diverse set of extracurricular sporting and leisure activities.



## Introduction

### **Mental health problems of all kinds can be prevented.**

Our mental health is a powerful asset. It is a key that allows us to unlock a wide range of health and social advantages. Yet mental health problems are currently costing the Scottish economy £8.8Bn per annum<sup>1</sup>. This figure represents half of what the Scottish Government spent on health and sport in the 2021-22 financial year<sup>2</sup>.

As we emerge from the Coronavirus pandemic, it is critical that councils invest in strategies to prevent mental health problems in all stages of life. For too long we've been firefighting by supporting people in crisis – addressing people's mental wellbeing only after difficulties have arisen whilst the demand and pressure on frontline acute services continues to grow. Whilst these services are vitally important, they won't, alone, reduce the number of people experiencing emotional distress. We should re-balance our efforts towards prevention by addressing the root causes of poor mental health.

Local government is well-placed to deliver transformational investment in community initiatives to promote good mental health. It is also important that all council departments, local health boards and health and social care partnerships work together for effective prevention of mental health problems.

#### **Councillors elected in May should commit to the following actions to improve public mental health in their communities.**

- **Adopt a 'mental health in all policies' approach to cross-departmental working at local councils.**
- **Commit to transformational investment in community-based groups.**
- **Engage with local communities to develop naturally diverse, safe, and accessible public green space.**
- **Ensure all children and young people in the community have access to a diverse set of extracurricular sporting and leisure activities.**

### **ADOPT A 'MENTAL HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES' APPROACH TO CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL WORKING AT LOCAL COUNCILS.**

#### ACTION

# 1

We have to stop thinking about mental health in a silo. All government departments including health, education, housing, employment, transport, culture, and justice can and should take action to promote good mental health.

We cannot only treat our way out of the growing mental health crisis. We know that services are stretched beyond capacity with lengthy waiting lists. We have to support people, families, and communities to live mentally healthy lives and prevent mental health problems developing.

In 2015, the EU recommended that local and national governments take practical steps to enshrine 'mental health in all policies' into their organisational-wide policy development processes. Evidence-based guidance produced by cross-national governments was also published<sup>3</sup>. Despite the UK no longer being a member of the EU, there is great merit to applying this guidance to a Scottish context.

In Sweden, all regional governments (equivalent to Scottish local authorities) have legal responsibility for mental health. Stockholm has developed a regional mental wellbeing strategy 2022-2030 with a focus on cross-agency collaboration.

A key insight is that "Mental health in cities and urban areas depends on many public sector institutions such as healthcare, education, labour market, and other structures in cities such as family, neighbourhoods, communities, and other social support groups"<sup>4</sup>.

**We recommend newly formed councils strengthen their formal structures with health and social care partnerships and integrated boards to ensure collaboration between all local government departments and health to deliver holistic and joined-up services that promote good mental health in the local community.**

**COMMIT TO  
TRANSFORMATIONAL  
INVESTMENT IN  
COMMUNITY-BASED  
GROUPS.**

**ACTION**

**2**

Councils are well-placed to work in partnership with local third sector organisations to deliver a range of new mental health supports through community-based groups.

Holistic early intervention responses to mental and emotional distress, such as exercise referral schemes, social prescribing, and peer support have been shown to promote social inclusion<sup>5</sup>, enhance resilience<sup>6</sup> and improve quality-of-life<sup>7</sup>. Social prescribing initiatives can improve the links between mental health services and third sector organisations, improving access to a broader range of services, in a complementary and coherent way<sup>8</sup>.

Previous studies have indicated that these social prescribing initiatives can also improve feelings of social connectedness and overall mental wellbeing<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, peer-support programmes have been found to improve day to day functioning<sup>10</sup>, reduce distressing symptoms<sup>11</sup>, and decrease the burden on acute mental health services<sup>12</sup>, while exercise referral schemes can significantly improve physical and psychosocial outcomes<sup>13</sup> and aid sustained recovery from severe mental health problems<sup>14</sup>.

**We recommend councils increase their investment in community-based groups to prevent mental health problems and improve social connectedness.**

**ENGAGE WITH LOCAL  
COMMUNITIES TO DEVELOP  
NATURALLY DIVERSE,  
SAFE, AND ACCESSIBLE  
PUBLIC GREEN SPACE.**

**ACTION**

**3**

Everyday contact with nature is an important need for many and vital in keeping us emotionally, psychologically, and physically healthy. Spending time in green spaces, such as parks, is linked to improved life satisfaction, reduced anxiety, and increased happiness<sup>15</sup>.

Parks and green spaces that are poorly maintained, have litter problems, limited biodiversity, or traffic noise which disrupts the peace, quiet and tranquillity of green spaces all present barriers to noticing and connecting with nature. These barriers are more likely to be the reality for green spaces in deprived areas, particularly in city and urban environments.

As part of the Foundation's 2021 Mental Health Awareness Week campaign, 69% of Scottish adults said that connecting with nature had been important in terms of managing their mental health during the pandemic<sup>16</sup>. However, the same poll also found significant inequalities for some population sub-groups in their ability to access safe and clean public green space. For example, deprived communities are least likely to live near a high-quality nature space.

When we asked about particular fears around safety and harassment, there was a pronounced gender gap. Not feeling physically safe/safe from harm had hindered 26% of UK women from enjoying nature, compared to 9% of UK men.

Furthermore, our poll found that 32% of Scottish adults with long-term health conditions (LTCs) and disabilities which limit their daily activities 'a lot' cited being unable to physically access nature because of their health (or that of a family member) as a factor which limited their ability to be close to nature.

Local authorities should do more to ensure that everyone in the community is able to enjoy high-quality public green space where they can connect with nature in an accessible and safe manner. We welcome the requirement set out in the Planning (Scotland) Act for all planning authorities to prepare open space audits and strategies.

**We recommend:**

- 1. Local authorities work with communities to develop plans to improve the quality and stewardship of green and blue spaces as part of their Open Space Strategy.**
- 2. All local authorities introduce accurate and regular reporting requirements on the levels of cleanliness, safety and accessibility of parks and beaches.**
- 3. Urban housing plans increase availability of green space.**

ENSURE ALL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY HAVE ACCESS TO A DIVERSE SET OF EXTRACURRICULAR SPORTING AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES.

## ACTION

# 4

Childhood and young adulthood represent a particularly important time for development, wellbeing, and mental health. Some research suggests that around half of mental health problems develop by the mid-teens, with three-quarters established by the mid-twenties<sup>17</sup>.

An ongoing study conducted by the Foundation throughout the pandemic found widespread feelings of loneliness, particularly for children and young people<sup>18</sup>. As pandemic restrictions continue to ease, it is vital that councils invest in opportunities for children and young people to connect with others in a meaningful way. The Foundation was a key partner in the 2021 'Get into Summer' initiative which was successful in providing opportunities for young people experiencing exclusion to enjoy new activities and re-connect with others.

*"When you feel like you're stuck, you get stressed and anxious. But since the workshops, I feel like I've been out of my house most days of the week."<sup>19</sup>*

Emerging evidence suggests that physical activity may be protective of children's mental health. One review found that exercise interventions may protect children and young people's mental health, specifically in relation to depression<sup>20-22</sup>.

A study led by the University of Strathclyde found that children from more deprived families were nearly three times more likely to not be involved in sport than those from less deprived families<sup>23</sup>. There are several possible reasons for this disparity. i.e., few accessible sporting opportunities outside of school and unaffordable fees<sup>24</sup>.

### We recommend:

1. Both extracurricular activities and relevant public transport routes are provided to children and young people, free of charge.
2. Schools are used to host new community-based extracurricular activities.
3. Increased investment in non-sporting extracurricular opportunities. e.g., art, music, scouts/girl guides, drama, and other relevant groups.

## What next?

As Scotland emerges from the Coronavirus pandemic there is an invaluable opportunity to put the prevention of mental health problems at the heart of the public policy agenda. Local government is well-placed to deliver local assets and opportunities in a way which delivers good mental health for all.

Our four recommendations, if adopted, would leverage local community actors across the nation and make a real difference to Scotland's public mental health outcomes.

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