

From awareness to action:

how governments across the UK can tackle the mental health crisis



**MENTAL
HEALTH
AWARENESS
WEEK**
11-17 MAY 2026

ACTION

FOR YOURSELF,
FOR **SOMEONE ELSE**,
FOR ALL OF US

Mental Health Awareness Week

ACTION



The theme for Mental Health Awareness Week this year is 'action'.

Because while raising awareness is vital, real change comes when we take action too. The UK is facing an urgent mental health crisis and it's getting worse.

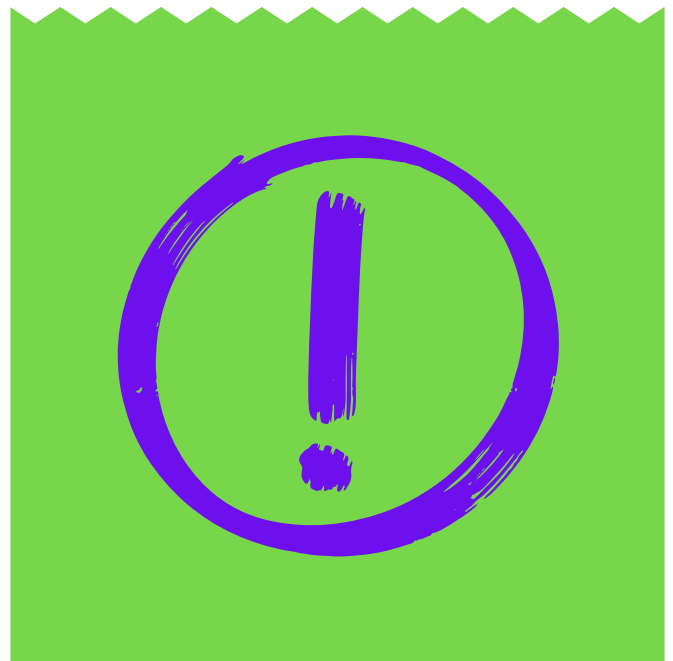
Many of us are acutely aware of the importance of good mental health, but we aren't always taking the action that we could be - as individuals, or communities.

And at the political level, despite some promising initiatives from the government, we haven't yet seen the scale of action that is needed.

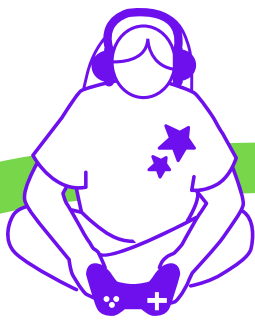
The reality is that, across the UK, the mental health of our population is deteriorating at pace.

Poor mental health can sap the joy from life, fracture relationships, tear families apart and end lives.

The scale is stark. An estimated 1.7m people are on mental health waiting lists, and the cost to the UK of mental health problems exceeds £117 billion a year.^{1,2} One in five workers have needed to take time off in the last year due to poor mental health caused by pressure or stress.³



Young people are hit hardest. A quarter of young people in England are experiencing a mental health condition, and 39% of them have taken time off work in the past year due to poor mental health.^{4,5} Nearly one million are not in any form of education, employment or training.⁶ A generation is being held back before it has had the chance to begin.



A part of the solution is better treatment.

We will always stand alongside those who are seeking to make treatment faster, more effective, safe, and dignified.

BUT WE CANNOT TREAT OUR WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS.

That's why the action we are calling for this Mental Health Awareness Week is on the prevention of mental health problems.

We need to reset our conception of what good looks like in mental health.

WE ARE CALLING FOR...

A strategic, evidence-based approach from the government to prevent mental health problems before they take root. We need a clear vision and a plan to support the nation's mental health.



Our action plan for preventing mental health problems

01

Address the social determinants

Issues like poverty, poor housing, and experiencing discrimination severely damage people's chances of experiencing good mental health.⁷

And in addition to the long-term action we need to address these drivers of poor mental health, in the short-term we need targeted measures aimed at the groups in society most likely to experience mental health problems. For example, new parents are at particularly high risk, as are LGBT+ young people, and people seeking asylum.^{8,9,10}



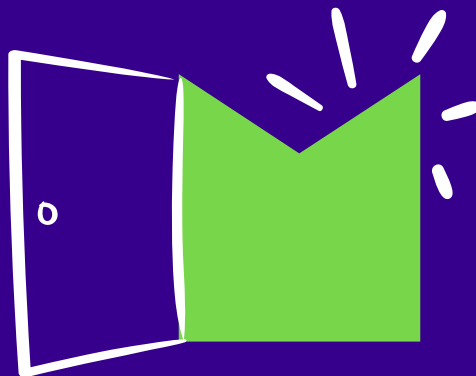
02

Help people and communities to better understand and manage their mental health

There is strong evidence for many preventative interventions, such as making sure that mums and dads are supported in the perinatal period, anti-bullying programmes, social and emotional learning programmes in schools, and supporting managers to create mentally healthy work environments.¹¹

These programmes should be rolled out across the country, but we also need to see the infrastructure put in place to support this expansion. This includes making sure that integrated care boards and local authorities are held to account for improving their population's mental health, re-establishing the axed public mental health team in the Department for Health and Social Care, and funding these local systems to deliver.¹²

In addition to in-person work in communities, new digital approaches offer potential. Work is underway to assess the effectiveness of some of these tools; as new ones emerge, the government should ensure that they are rapidly assessed and, where shown to be effective, rolled out rapidly to help address the mental health crisis.¹³



03

Make the online environment safer

The online environment can be a driver of both good and bad mental health. Far too often, its potential for good is negated by the appalling harms faced by both children and adults online, from suicide and eating disorder forums – still accessible two years after the Online Safety Act became law - through to vile misogyny, racism, and mental health misinformation on major platforms.

We need to see full implementation of the Online Safety Act, with Ofcom being far bolder and quicker in the use of its powers, and new legislation where it is necessary to strengthen it. And, as we have argued in our response to the government's consultation on a social media ban, we need to cut off unsafe platforms' access to our children, and introduce a film classification-style age rating to access them, based on an independently-established judgement of their appropriateness for children at different developmental stages. We also need new legislation to make sure that AI chatbots are fully in scope of the Act.

These actions are all achievable. Some will require financial outlay, but they will help to significantly reduce the more than £117bn lost to mental health problems across the UK. The responsibility for these actions is not solely in the domain of any one government department; they require close working between multiple parts of the government, both central and local.

FOR THIS REASON, WE NEED A CROSS-GOVERNMENT PLAN TO IMPROVE THE PUBLIC'S MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS THE UK.

This plan should set out a strategic approach targeted at where resources can make the most difference and reduce the deep inequalities in mental health.

The approach set out in this paper is in line with the government's welcome 'three shifts' for improving the country's health.

We propose a move towards prevention; towards work in the community that equips people to manage their own mental health and support those around them; and one which grasps new digital opportunities, whilst also protecting people from the damaging elements of the online environment.

We propose a move towards

- ▶ **PREVENTION**
- ▶ **WORK IN THE COMMUNITY**
- ▶ **NEW DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES**



A whole-UK approach

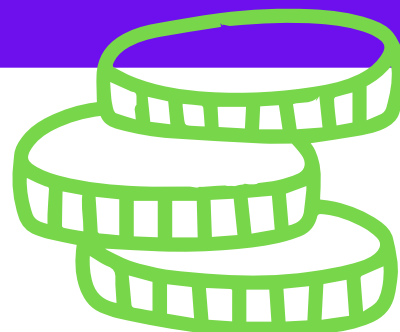
Many of the actions needed to improve the mental health of the UK population sit in Westminster, but there is still plenty of action that governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should be taking:

01

Fund prevention

Devolved administrations have all recognised the importance of prevention to solving their mental health crises. This needs to be followed with real action. Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should use their budgeting powers to make sure prevention of poor mental health is a spending priority, and make their spending decisions transparent and accountable. This needs to go beyond the departments that typically spend on health – we need a cross-departmental approach, with appropriate budgeting to match it.

This should be supported by the Westminster government, which should ensure that funding provided to devolved nations' governments is adequate to fund the population need in each nation.



02

Design new approaches to tackling poor mental health

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have different national cultures, contexts, and challenges. Their governments should use their powers to develop innovation, share best practice, and lead the way on prevention, working creatively and proactively within their powers.

03

Take a 'mental health in all policies' approach.

Each devolved administration should make sure that mental health is not only a part of their health planning, but is accounted for in every area of devolved decision-making. Prevention of poor mental health across the whole of the UK is only possible with a comprehensive cross-government plan in each nation, suited for each nation's particular mental health challenges.



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