

How the Scottish Government can prevent mental health problems:

Our recommendations for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy



Mental Health
Foundation
Scotland



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What is the Mental Health Foundation?

Since 1949, the Mental Health Foundation has been the UK's leading charity for everyone's mental health.

With dedicated offices in each of the UK's four nations, our vision is for a world with good mental health for all. With prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive.

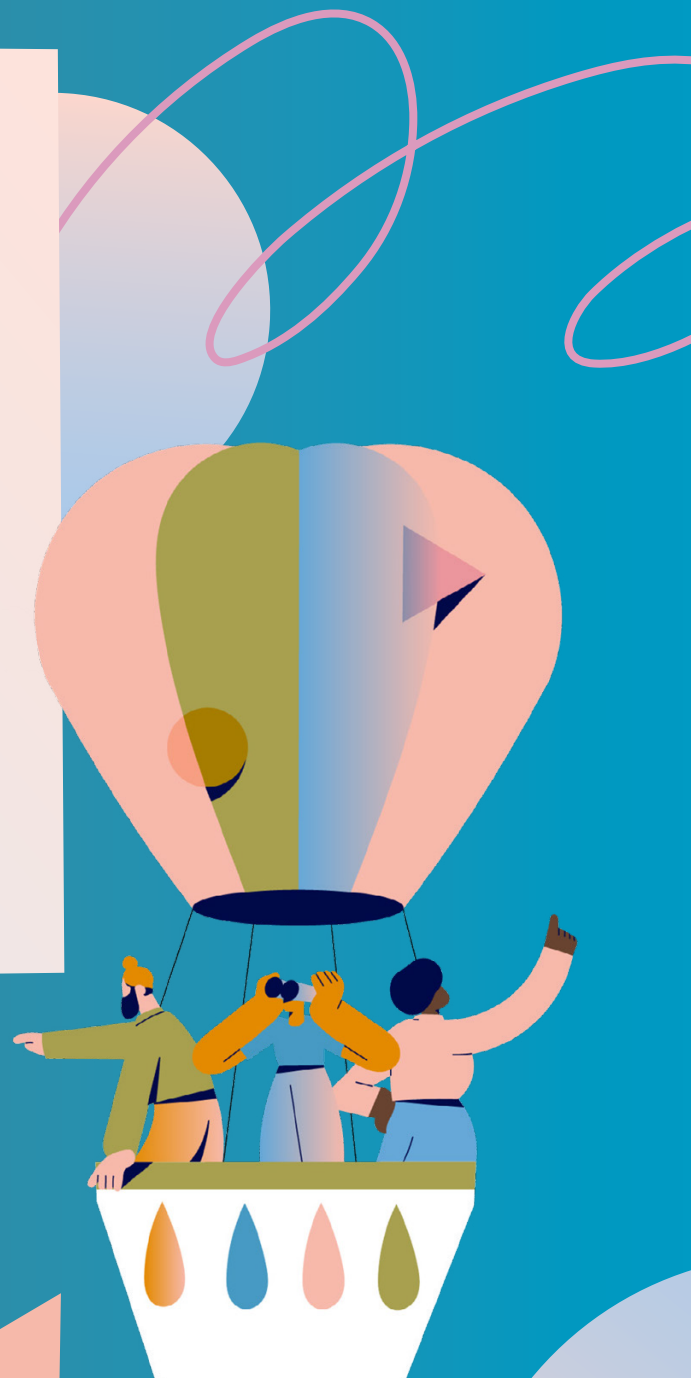
We drive change towards a mentally healthy society for all, and support communities, families, and individuals to live mentally healthier lives, with a particular focus on those at greatest risk.

The practical things we do

- Community and peer programmes: we test and evaluate the best approaches to improving mental health in communities and then roll them out as widely as possible.
- Research: we publish studies and reports on what protects mental health and the causes of poor mental health and how to tackle them.
- Public engagement: we give advice to millions of people on mental health. We are most well-known for running Mental Health Awareness Week across the UK each year.
- Advocacy: we propose solutions and campaign for change to address the underlying causes of poor mental health.

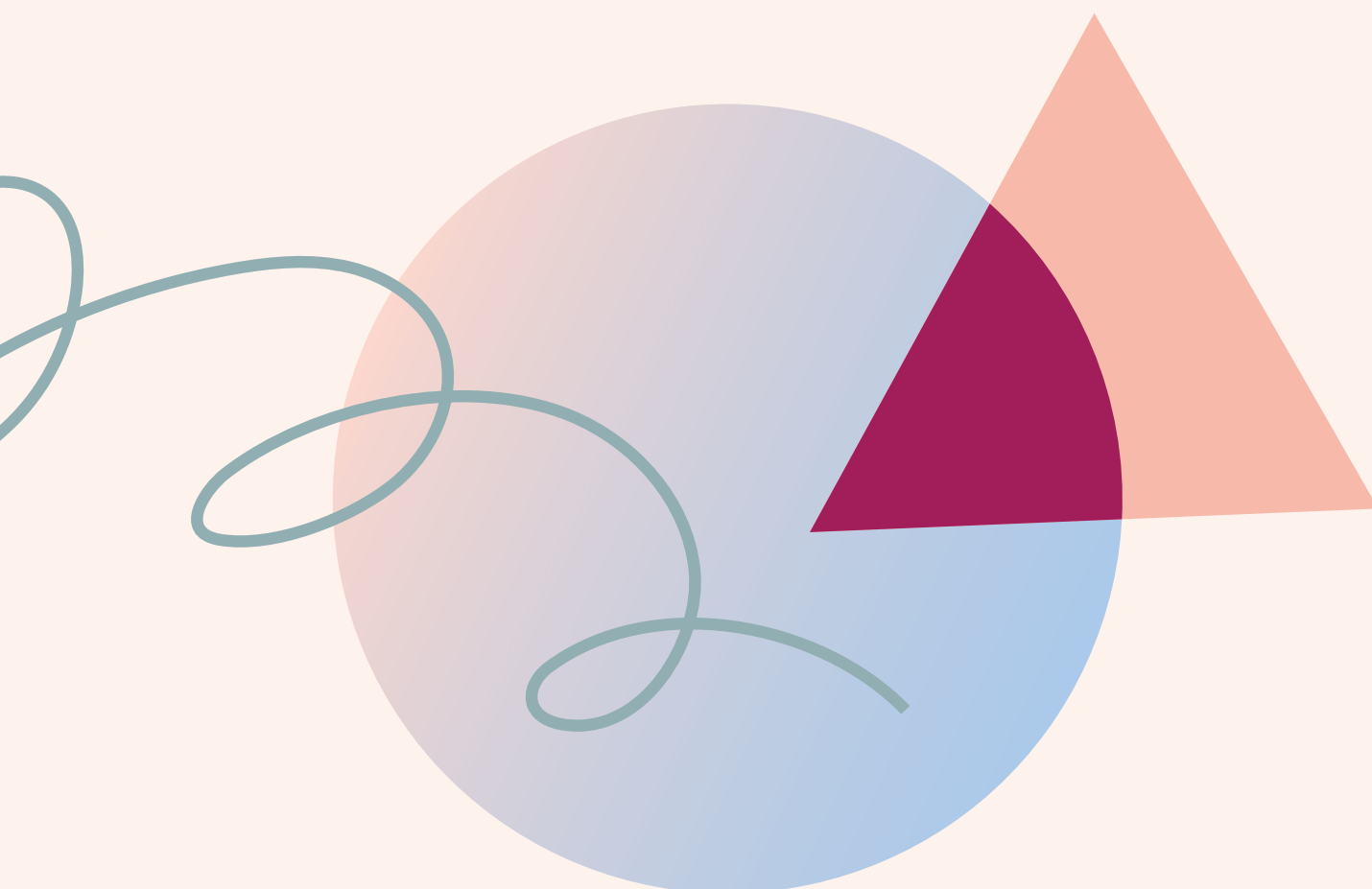


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Introduction

The Scottish Government is asking the public what actions should be included in a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Scotland. A radical approach to improving people's mental health in Scotland is long overdue. We can't treat our way out of the mental health crisis. The Scottish Government can and should be doing much more to prevent mental health problems from arising in the first place.

Our mental health is shaped by our environments and experiences. This includes things that we may have little control over such as job security, housing, how much money we have, and the facilities and services available to us in our communities. We need our governments to take action to give people the best opportunity to thrive and live mentally healthy lives.

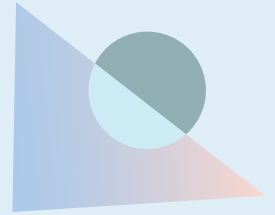
We have also been facing additional challenges. The impact of the pandemic on our mental health has been severe. Some groups of people living in Scotland have been particularly hard hit by successive lockdowns and restrictions on day-to-day life. The current cost of living crisis is putting additional pressure on people and creating new mental health risks.

If we want to make sure everybody has the opportunity to enjoy good mental health, bold new action is needed from the Scottish Government to ensure we all have the resources and support needed to thrive.

A radical approach to improving people's mental health in Scotland is long overdue.

This document details our recommendations for the actions the Scottish Government can take to prevent mental health problems. By doing so, we believe the Scottish Government can make significant progress towards good mental health for all.

What are we asking for?



1. A cross-departmental approach to preventing mental health problems

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- Our mental health is affected by every part of our lives. All government departments, not just Health, should consider how their policies will impact our mental health.
- The new Scottish Government Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy should include:
 - Mental health in all policies
 - Investment in prevention
 - Engagement with lived experience

'Mental health in all policies'

We need to stop thinking about mental health in a health silo.

For too long the approach to mental health in Scotland has been focused on mental health services and treatments. Of course, if people are experiencing poor mental health,

All government departments including health, education, housing, employment, transport, culture, and justice must take action to promote good mental health, through a 'mental health in all policies' approach.

they must have quick access to the right treatment. However, we are already seeing waiting lists of months and years for services that cannot meet the demand. We must do more to prevent mental health problems arising in the first place, support people to live well, and reduce the need for specialist mental health support and crisis care. This means ensuring schools support mental wellbeing among its students; workplaces are open to and supportive of mental health; and neighbourhoods have spaces and activities for community-based connection.

To make sure this happens, we need new formal processes for sharing best practice and tracking progress in each government department.

A cross-departmental 'mental health in all policies' Forum should be implemented across each of the Scottish Government's ministerial departments.

Investing in prevention

Little is known about how much the Scottish Government invests in prevention of mental health problems. To improve transparency and track relevant investment:

All future annual budgets and spending reviews from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy should include an appendix detailing cross-departmental spending allocated to preventing mental health problems.

We welcomed the Scottish Government's 'Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund' which in Year 1, supported nearly 2,000 community projects including sport, outdoor initiatives, arts and crafts, and nature, and covering groups such as older people, those with long-term conditions or disabilities, people living in rural areas and the LGBT communityⁱ.

However, we are disappointed the level of investment to this fund decreased from a total of £21 million in the 2021-22 financial year to a current total of £15 million for the 2022-23 financial year.

The Scottish Government has a vision for an economy which prioritises the wellbeing of current and future generationsⁱⁱ. For this to be true, we need to see pre-allocated spending increases every year to ensure that charities and community organisations can continue to offer programmes and services that benefit people. These organisations need financial security to plan and pay for continuing programmes, staff and running costs.

Engagement with lived experience

Governments should not be making decisions which affect people without first speaking to people about what they need.

Engaging with lived experience ensures that policy and services are effective and relevant to people's everyday reality.

The Mental Health Foundation is the host of VOX Scotlandⁱⁱⁱ. VOX (Voices of eXperience) was formed to ensure that the voices of people with a lived experience of mental illness can actively shape Scotland's laws, policy and services relating to mental health:

The Mental Health Foundation has also recently established the Diverse Experiences Advisory Panel (DEAP), in partnership with The ALLIANCE. DEAP is a group of people with lived experience of mental health, inequalities and/or

discrimination. The purpose of DEAP is to inform the Scottish Government's mental health policy through diverse voices, experiences, and insights to advise decision-makers, government and other organisations and services involved in mental health, on how to recognise and reduce the impact of inequalities, and support good mental health and wellbeing for people and communities in Scotland.

The Scottish Government should learn lessons from the approaches to advocacy and engagement taken by both VOX and DEAP and integrate these lessons into policy and service development and delivery under the new Strategy.

The Scottish Government should improve the quality of their engagement with third-sector Non-Government Organisations (NGO)s to build and maintain trusted relationships with lived experience groups on an on-going basis.

Meaningful disbursement and recognitions should be given to panelists for giving their time and sharing their expertise.

2. Preventing mental health problems for the whole population

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Mental health problems of all kinds can be prevented. When we talk about the whole population, we mean that every person living in Scotland can be supported to live well with good mental health. In our response to Scottish Government, we highlighted the following areas to focus on:

- Perinatal mental health
- Parenting programmes
- Mental health literacy
- Access to sport, arts and leisure
- Students
- Older people
- Link workers
- Supporting good mental health in the workplace

The importance of investing in early years

The most effective investment we can make to prevent mental health problems is in the wellbeing of children and young people. Half of all long-term mental health issues in the UK are established by the age of 14^{iv}.

The pandemic has created additional pressures in children's lives. They have been disproportionately affected through school closures, limited access to services and systems of support, and reduced opportunities to play, take part in recreational activities, or socialise with friends^v.

Post-pandemic, creative and bold solutions are needed to protect the mental health of children and young people growing up in Scotland.



Perinatal mental health

Perinatal mental health problems are those which occur during pregnancy or in the first year following the birth of a child^{vi}. There is strong evidence that the first 1,000 days of a child's life shape their long-term health and wellbeing. See, for example, UNICEF's First Thousand Days Strategy^{vii}. However, social inequalities mean that some people have a better chance than others of a healthy start to life, and this leads to unequal mental health outcomes.

Perinatal mental health services should be designed in a way that they can respond to the complex needs of pregnant and postnatal women that arise from social inequalities. It is vital these services are equally available to new and expecting parents across Scotland.



Parenting programmes

'Parenting programmes' is a term used to describe a range of interventions for parents, which are often delivered to a group^{vii}. They aim to support parents to strengthen their relationships with their children and foster their child's emotional and social skills development.

There is good evidence parenting programmes can help promote positive mental health and reduce the risk of poor emotional development for children. There are a growing number of studies that report positive returns on investment (ROI) from parenting programmes of up to £15.80 per £1 spent^{ix}.

The Scottish Government should ensure that evidence-based parenting programmes are freely available to all new and expecting parents across Scotland.

Mental health literacy (understanding of mental health)

Schools have a key role to play in tackling the rise of childhood mental health problems across Scotland^x.

Emerging evidence supports the effectiveness of school based Mental Health Education (MHE) in reducing stigma and promoting children's mental health literacy^{xi}, help-seeking attitudes, resilience and emotional wellbeing^{xliii}. Promoting children's wellbeing and resilience are essential in preventing and reducing the severity of mental health problems.

Currently, individual schools determine whether they wish to pursue programmes that promote good mental health.

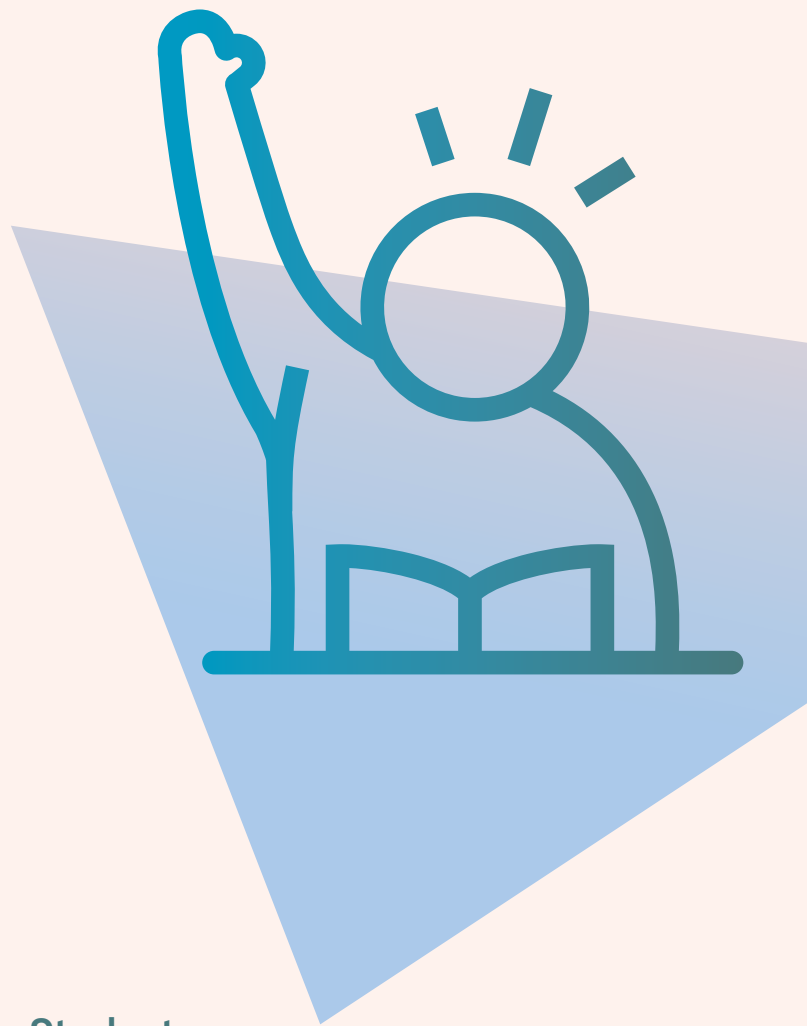
All teachers (in-post and trainee) should receive evidence-based resources and training to promote conversations about mental health and wellbeing in the classroom. These must be supported by a 'whole school approach' to mental health, where everyone is involved in creating a mentally healthy school.

Access to sport, arts and leisure

Physical activity can help children's mental health. One study found that exercise interventions may protect children and young people's mental health, specifically in relation to depression^{xii, xiii, xiv}.

However, not all children and young people in Scotland have the same access to sport, arts and leisure, with those from more deprived families being three times more likely not to be involved in any sport^{xv}.

Ensure that all children and young people have access to arts, sport and leisure extracurricular activities, free of charge. Furthermore, all under 25's living in Scotland should be automatically provided with a free bus pass to access these opportunities in their community.



Students

In 2021, the Mental Health Foundation in Scotland published the largest ever study of student mental health in Scotland^{xvi}. The 'Thriving Learners' study revealed nearly three quarters (74%) of university students surveyed reported having low wellbeing.

The Scottish Government should provide designated funding to support wellbeing in colleges and universities, and measure student wellbeing outcomes regularly.

Older People

The Mental Health Foundation's report on loneliness published in 2022, titled 'All the lonely people'^{xvii}, highlighted that a lack of meaningful social connection and persistent feelings of loneliness and social isolation can lead to mental health problems. People who are often or always lonely have a higher risk of developing certain mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression^{xviii}.

The Scottish Government should invest in community-based opportunities for older people to continue engaging in activities that reduce the risk of chronic loneliness and social isolation.

Link workers

Link workers are already in place in some GP practices across Scotland. They link patients to support programmes in their community. For example, exercise referral schemes and peer support.

The Scottish Government's commitment to 1,000 new community-based mental health workers is welcome. It is vital that staff have an up-to-date awareness of the different opportunities available in their community. They should be supported to have strong links with diverse groups.

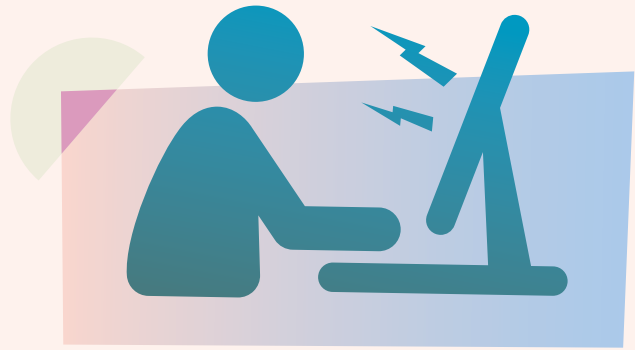
Link workers must have a clear outreach function to the community, especially to diverse higher risk groups, and take a public mental health approach.



Supporting good mental health in the workplace

Having a fulfilling job can be good for your mental health and general wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundation believes in workplaces where everyone can thrive. We also believe in the role of employers, employees, and businesses in creating thriving communities. Good mental health at work and good management go hand in hand and there is strong evidence that workplaces with high levels of mental wellbeing are more productive. Addressing wellbeing at work increases productivity by as much as 12%^{xix}.

With more people working from home or on a hybrid basis, investment is required to ensure that staff have the support they need from employers to look after their mental health. Our research shows that in workplaces, rapid access to psychological supports alongside programmes to create mentally healthy workplaces are cost-effective^{xx}.



The Scottish Government should encourage employers to provide brief psychological supports via the workplace, along with programmes to develop mentally healthy workplaces. As part of this, financial support should be made available to small and medium sized enterprises (SME)s to engage with and access mentally healthy workplace practice training and advisory services on an on-going basis.



3. Preventing mental health problems for people at higher risk of poor mental health

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Risks of mental ill-health are not equally distributed across the population. People who face the most significant disadvantages in life also face the greatest risks to their mental health. This unequal distribution of risk to our mental health is what we call mental health inequalities^{xxi}.

That's why we need government action to address inequality and remove the social barriers to good mental health. To understand more read our report, '[Tackling social inequalities to reduce mental health problems: How everyone can flourish equally](#)', which explains how inequalities contribute to poor mental health in the UK today^{xxii}.

As part of the Scottish Government's consultation process, we engaged in co-production and/or drew on expertise from organisations working with groups of people experiencing more poor mental health than the general population.

- **Gender**
- **People experiencing poverty**
- **People living with Long-Term Conditions (LTC)s**
- **Black and minority ethnic communities**
- **LGBT+**
- **Refugees and asylum seekers**
- **People with care-experience**
- **Children and young people in the criminal justice system**

Our engagement with organisations and individuals with lived experience in preparation for this briefing document has highlighted the need for the Scottish Government to develop new training and performance development for public sector staff. These programmes should be developed in collaboration with relevant

NGOs and people with lived experience. It is vital that these programmes are anti-racist, culturally sensitive and inclusive. The views of people from the groups outlined above should provide the basis of this training and performance development.

Gender

The overall rates of severe mental health disorders in Scotland are similar for both men and women,^{xxiii} however, more women than men experience common mental health problems such as anxiety at 15% and 13%, respectively, in Scotland in 2018/2019^{xxiv}. There are also gendered differences between women and men in Scotland in rates of eating disorders (8.6% and 4.07% respectively)^{xxv}, self-harm (9% and 5% respectively)^{xxvi} and suicide (6.7% and 21.2%)^{xxvii}. In addition to poverty and income inequality, one of the key risk factors for women's mental health is domestic abuse^{xxviii}.

The Scottish Government should ensure that mental healthcare and promotion of all services, policies, and practice adopt an intersectional lens at both local and national levels as well as supporting third sector organisations to implement this approach.

Women face health and social inequality barriers such as racism and sexism so there is a need for improved understanding of these complex needs and to tailor services accordingly.

Further urgent action is required by the Scottish Government to reduce domestic abuse rates for women in Scotland.

Measures should include embedding awareness about Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) across primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities.

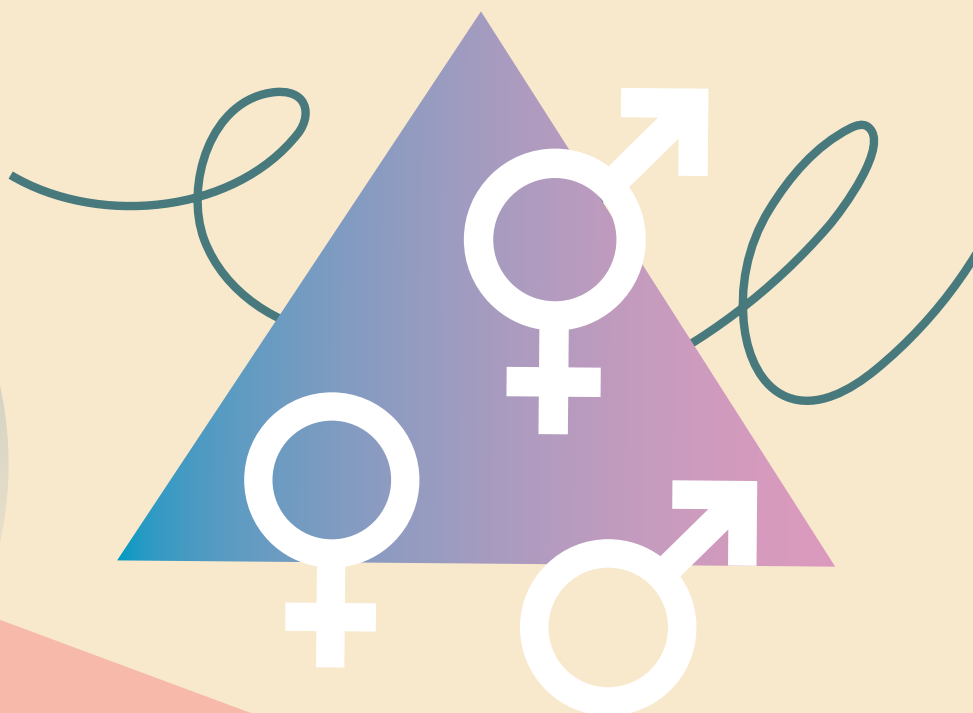
More must be done to ensure that women's health is considered in the development and implementation of workplace practices.

Employers should be supported to implement and evaluate these practices on an on-going basis.

The Scottish Government should work with relevant NGOs to develop gender-sensitive workplace practices and policies. For example, menstrual and menopause policies.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the reality of men's mental health as part of our gender work. Data from the National Records of Scotland show that men continue to account for most deaths by suicide in Scotland.

The Scottish Government should develop a Men's Health Plan with actions for improving men's mental health and tackling deep-seated social inequalities.



Tackling poverty and boosting incomes

More than one million people and almost a quarter of all children in Scotland live in poverty. Studies suggest, compared to those living in affluent areas, adults living in Scotland's most deprived areas are twice as likely to experience anxiety or depression; are three times more likely to die from suicide; and are eighteen times more likely to have a drug-related death^{xxxi}.

Debt is linked to increased risk of developing a mental health problem including anxiety and depression. Facing the sharpest decline in living standards since records began, many people are getting into debt to meet the everyday challenges of the cost-of-living crisis.

The Scottish Government should develop debt write off schemes.

Recognising how debt can lock people into poverty, as well as cause on-going stress and anxiety, the Scottish Government should work with local authorities, lenders, and landlords to develop new debt write-off schemes that will ease this pressure and allow people to move on with greater financial security.

Free bus travel should be extended to people on low-income benefits.

Free bus travel recipients can access employment, training, and education opportunities in their community. Other means of tackling poverty include developing debt write-off schemes, and ensuring low-income families have access to free wraparound childcare services.

People living in poverty have experienced trauma so we must make sure that the systems in place to support are equipped with the right skills and understanding.

All new Social Security Scotland teams must receive training and ongoing development in a trauma-informed approach to delivery.

Training in a trauma-informed approach to delivery for Scotland's Social Security teams should include awareness of those key issues which cause distress for benefit recipients including debt, sanctions, addiction, domestic abuse, and family breakdown.



People living with Long-Term Conditions (LTC)s

Living with LTCs or physical disability can increase the risk of experiencing mental health problems and low wellbeing. There is consistent evidence of an association between physical disability and depression^{xxxii}. Experience of stigma and discrimination may significantly contribute to this relationship^{xxxiii}.

Service delivery staff and organisations should be provided with the training and

confidence needed to understand the mental health and wellbeing needs of service/programme users.

The Scottish Government should support organisations working with people who are living with LTCs with training and skills to better support the mental health of people who access their services.

Black and minority ethnic communities*

Being a victim of racism has been associated with mental health problems^{xxxiv}. The emotional and psychological effects of racism have been described as consistent

with traumatic stress^{xxxv} and the negative effects are cumulative^{xxxvi}. Racist stereotypes and institutional racism are likely to contribute to the discrimination experienced by people from Black and minority ethnic communities in mental health services^{xxxvii}.

***WHY DO WE USE THE TERM BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES?**

The Mental Health Foundation strives to be an anti-racist organisation. You can read more about this work here: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/our-commitments-race-and-diversity>

As part of our review, we discussed

language and agreed to use the term 'Black and minority ethnic' when discussing issues related to racialised communities. This is to ensure that people from traveler communities are included. The Foundation continues to seek feedback from individuals and organisations on the use of appropriate language.

We need urgent action on eradicating institutional racism in Scotland, particularly within mental health services and other public services. . What form this should take must be developed from on-going and meaningful conversations with communities and those with the expertise to guide this process. This process must be properly resourced and with a realistic timeframe that reflects the urgency of the matter.

The Scottish Government should increase the provision of culturally appropriate and anti-racist early intervention supports.

This should include self-help resources and psychological therapies available in English as well as other languages, delivered by staff who are participating in anti-racist training and development programmes throughout their training and careers.

The Scottish Government should ensure that all frontline public service workers participate in anti-racist training and development programmes throughout their training and careers.

These programmes should educate professionals on the multitude of issues that affect Black and minority ethnic communities. Rather than one-off staff training, what is required is on-going development programmes that embed reflective practice among practitioners, supported by people with lived experience. Public sector participants in this training and development programme should include, but not be limited to: doctors, nurses, midwives, teachers, fire officers, ambulance staff, police officers, and all frontline mental health practitioners.

LGBT+ people

LGBT+ people are more at-risk of experiencing discrimination, exclusion, and harassment than the general population^{xxxviii} resulting in higher rates of poor mental health across the LGBT+ community, including anxiety, depressions, substance use, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide^{xxxix}. The number of recorded homophobic and transphobic hate crimes has risen sharply across the UK since 2019^{xl}.

The Scottish Government must do more to ensure Scotland is a safe and inclusive place for LGBT+ people by...

...banning all conversion therapy practices...

...which seek to change and/or suppress an individual's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It should continue supporting the implementation of LGBT+ inclusive education in all Scottish schools and ensure LGBT+ themes are embedded across the curriculum during any upcoming education reforms.

Safe LGBT+ spaces are vital for allowing LGBT+ people to meet and connect with others in a meaningful way.

The Scottish Government should work with LGBT+ NGOs to improve both provision and access to safe LGBT+ spaces.

Ensuring spaces are available which tailor to a range of life circumstances is vital for meeting aspirations of inclusivity. For example, ensuring safe LGBT+ spaces are available in rural communities as well as spaces/social programmes being tailored to different age groups.

It is also vital that services are available to LGBT+ people in an LGBT+ sensitive, friendly, respectful, and self-reflective manner.

We agree with the recommendations in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's report, 'Health needs assessment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary people' report^{xli} which explains the need for re-designing services to ensure they are more inclusive to the needs of LGBT+ people.



Refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers are more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population, including higher rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders^{xixiii}. The increased vulnerability to mental health problems that refugees, and asylum seekers face is linked to pre-migration experiences (such as war trauma) and post-migration conditions (such as separation from family, difficulties with asylum procedures and poor housing)^{xivxv}.

More support and resources should be made available to grassroots organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers to improve civic participation and mental health outcomes for both at-risk groups.

The Scottish Government must do more within its devolved powers to ensure Scotland is a safe and welcoming place for refugees and asylum seekers.

Increase civic participation and mental health supports for grassroots organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees.

The Foundation has worked with refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland for over 10 years.

Through our programmatic work, we have identified various barriers preventing refugees and asylum seekers from participating in civil decision-making forums. For example, perceived language barriers, not being aware of available opportunities, and fear of discrimination^{xvi}.

Extending free bus travel to all refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland.

Free bus travel would go far in removing barriers for active participation in wider society and civic engagement forums. The scheme would make a particularly positive difference for asylum seekers who are more likely to have very low-income.

It is also vital that public sector staff should receive on-going training and guidance to embed a sophisticated understanding of the often-complex needs and preferences of refugees and asylum seekers into their service delivery.

Services that are more responsive to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.



People with care experience

In 2020, 'The Promise Scotland'^{xlii} was established to make the changes demanded by the findings of the Independent Care Review^{xliii} to ensure that every child grows up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential.

The Scottish Government should accelerate the pace they are working towards meeting the recommendations outlined in the 'The Promise'.

The Scottish Government should work in partnership with local authorities and third sector organisations to increase the provision of family support hubs in communities across Scotland with the aim of keeping families together and preventing young people entering the care system.

Support should be available to the people who care for care experienced children/ adults – including parents, carers, and workforce.

The Scottish Government should set out plans for ending cross border placements where young people are put into care too far from their home.

All children and young people entering the care system should have their mental health needs assessed and be offered support with their mental health. This could take the form of low-level interventions (such as art therapy) or more intensive psychological treatments. Everyone with care experience should be fast-tracked to mental health supports as and when they require it across the life course.

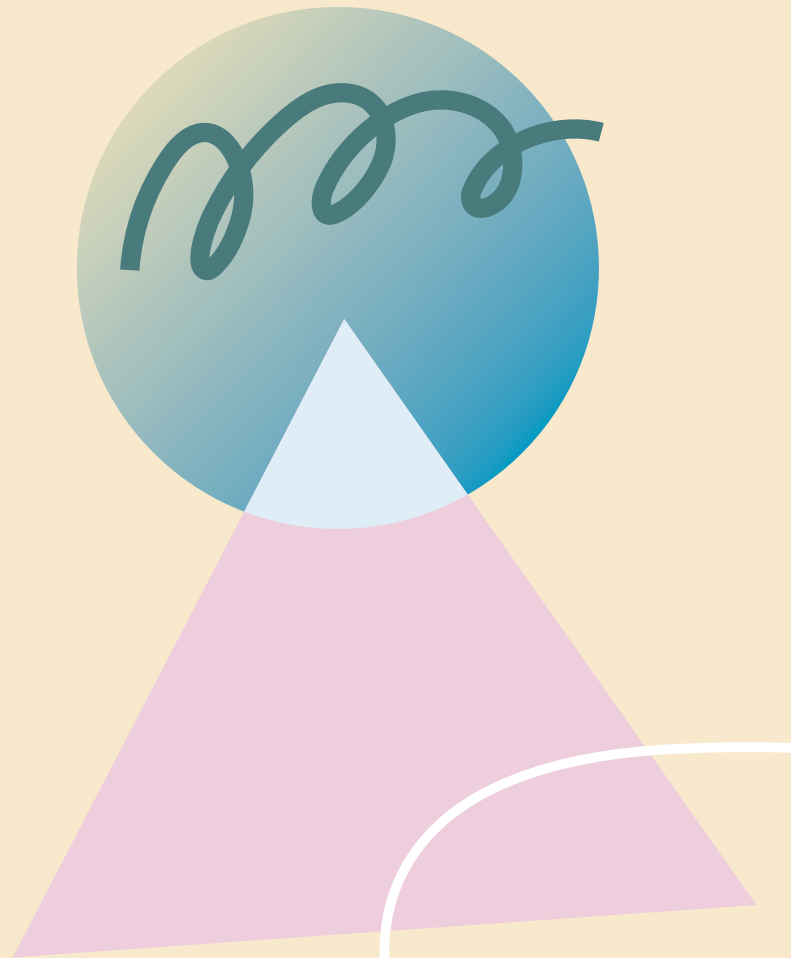
Everyone with experience of the care system should have access to the supports which will benefit their mental health and wellbeing.

Examples include access to consistent and relationship-based support, safe and secure housing, trauma-informed physical and mental health services, social work support, further education, and employment opportunities.

Children and young people in the criminal justice system

The Scottish Government should ensure that prison staff, solicitors, advocacy services, children hearing members, residential care staff, secure care staff, social workers and the police are trained in psychoeducation to develop an understanding of how to promote mental health and wellbeing with a trauma-informed lens.

This training should ensure that relevant professions can recognise the cultural issues which impact on the life chances of children in conflict with the law, and the need to address intergenerational trauma through family and community work.



Conclusion

There is no bright future for Scotland if we ignore mental health. The Scottish Government's new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is an opportunity to set a course of action that will prevent poor mental health and support people to live well.

We must re-balance our efforts towards prevention and address the root causes of poor mental health.

For too long our mental health strategy has been firefighting. It has been focused on supporting people in crisis – addressing people's mental wellbeing only after difficulties have arisen and relying upon reactive clinical services. While those are vitally important, they won't reduce the number of people experiencing emotional distress.

The Scottish Government's new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy provides the chance to ensure that impactful preventative actions for tackling mental health problems are put to the heart of the Scottish Government's approach to improving people's mental health and wellbeing.

By taking action across all areas of government, we can prevent people developing mental health problems, support people to have good mental health, and save lives.

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