



MADE IN COMMUNITIES

The Better Mental Health Fund:
Key learning points for local
councils and their partners

The Government set up the Better Mental Health Fund in 2021 to address mental health difficulties arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Funding was offered to 40 local authorities in England to commission evidence-based interventions to improve mental health and mental wellbeing in local communities. They implemented 314 individual projects over the 12 months of the programme, reaching well over half a million people in many of the most deprived areas of England. Centre for Mental Health provided the national evaluation of the programme.

Local councils used the Better Mental Health Fund to support a wide range of activities to promote mental health, covering a spectrum of preventative and support-based interventions and projects, for people at risk of experiencing poor mental health and for people who are already experiencing mental health challenges.

The Better Mental Health Fund provides invaluable learning for local councils and their partners about the keys to success in supporting public mental health activity at scale in England:

1 **Even small amounts of money can make a big difference** by building social and community capital. This is especially the case for smaller organisations, which are often the best placed to engage with people and groups facing the biggest risks to their mental health. Small, unconstituted groups are a vital but seldom-recognised part of the public mental health ecosystem: both as potential providers of support, but also as sources of intelligence about needs and means of coproducing solutions. They can benefit from small grants as well as links with, and support from, bigger voluntary sector organisations.

2 **Social approaches to mental distress can tackle some of the major factors** – such as isolation or exclusion – that are known to play a role in poor mental health. This is especially the case when projects build capacity within communities to promote mental health or generate social change to create better conditions for people to live in.



3 Local councils can **adopt interventions that already have a strong evidence base** and adapt them, where necessary, to the needs and preferences of groups within the population facing the highest risks to their mental health and the poorest access to support. This maximises the chances of funding being used to make a positive impact to wellbeing among the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

4 Goodwill and **strong relationships between local councils and voluntary and community sector organisations** is essential for success in public mental health.

5 **Short-term funding brings significant risks.** It takes time to establish projects and coproduce ways of working. And when projects end suddenly, providers are left with extra demand they cannot handle, and people lose valued support.

6 **Up to date joint strategic needs assessments (JSNAs)** and other robust needs assessments are a vital foundation for public mental health. They give insights about where needs are greatest and gaps are most pronounced.

7 It can be valuable for **local authorities to share resources** they've produced to get greater benefits across wider areas – learning from each other and maximising the use of staff time and resources. Care needs to be taken to adapt these to the local context.

8 **Political leadership is important** to help get projects started and keep them sustained when time-limited funding ends. Elected members in local authorities play a vital role in promoting and continuing initiatives in the communities they serve.

9 **Public mental health activity needs to be culturally appropriate.** The mental health workforce as a whole is not representative of the communities it serves, and this can hold projects back, for example when offering culturally appropriate therapy.

