



MANIFESTO FOR A MENTALLY HEALTHIER NATION

POLICIES FOR THE 2024 UK GENERAL ELECTION

In this UK general election year, over 60 of the country's biggest organisations with an interest in mental health, representing millions of voters, have come together to develop and promote these policy ideas, drawn from [A Mentally Healthier Nation](#).

Ahead of polling day we will campaign for these policies to be adopted as part of a 10-year, cross-government mental health strategy for England, ideally to begin in the first year of the next Parliament.

MENTAL HEALTH IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES TO VOTERS

Recent polling by respected polling company More in Common and commissioned by Rethink Mental Illness finds that the UK population now ranks mental health as a more important issue than unemployment, industrial action and Brexit. People under 40 rank its importance even above climate change.

THE UK'S MENTAL HEALTH IS GETTING WORSE

The cost-of-living crisis, Covid-19 pandemic and austerity have worsened many people's circumstances and services. Given that mental health is so strongly influenced by life conditions, we are facing higher rates of mental ill health. This is causing preventable misery, death, demand on stretched services, lost economic productivity, and costs of tens of billions of pounds.

BUT THERE IS HOPE...

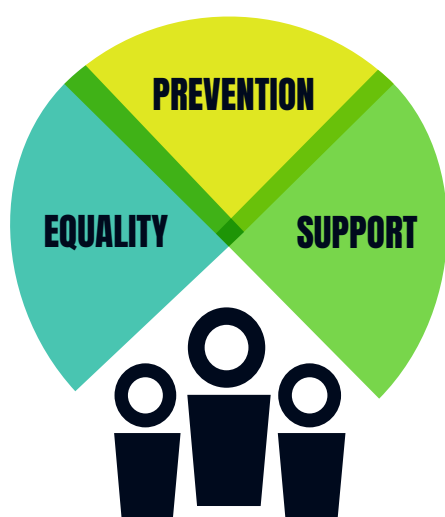
We know from programmes that have been properly funded, supported and measured, such as the mental health elements of NHS England's Long Term Plan, Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, the Time to Change stigma-busting campaign, Sure Start centres for families, Individual Placement and Support, and the Better Mental Health Fund, that proper investment in evidence-based and informed interventions can support significant improvements, reducing distress and cutting costs.



INTRODUCTION

OUR VISION FOR A MENTALLY HEALTHIER NATION

Signatories of this document believe that a long-term, comprehensive, cross-government plan is essential to protect and promote the whole nation's mental health. It is necessary because mental health problems affect millions of people in every aspect of their lives. It is necessary because action across government could help to turn the tide of rising levels of mental ill health in our society today. And it is necessary because we cannot become a healthier, more equitable and productive nation without better mental health for us all. This new plan must encompass prevention, equality and support so that we address the causes as well as the symptoms.



Address the causes of mental ill health



Eradicate mental health inequalities



Ensure timely access to local services

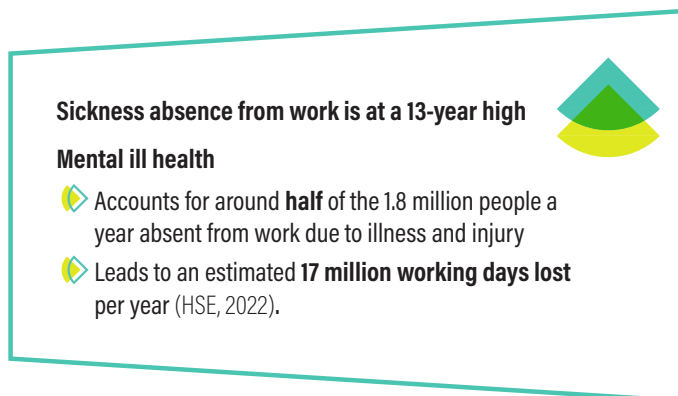
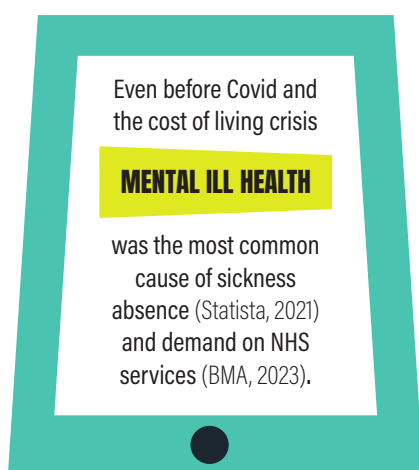
BACKGROUND

Mental, and indeed physical, health results from an interaction between social determinants (such as poverty and discrimination), environmental factors (like housing and air pollution), personal attributes (including genes and behaviours), and the health care and other support available to people (Davie, 2021). The World Health Organisation, among other experts, say that social determinants account for up to 55% of health outcomes (WHO, 2017). Given that, from the 2007 banking crisis onwards, many social determinants have worsened for a lot of people, it is sadly not surprising that mental health is getting worse in the UK. A series of crises have reduced the resilience of people and the services that support them, stalling and even reversing healthy life expectancy (Marmot *et al.*, 2020).

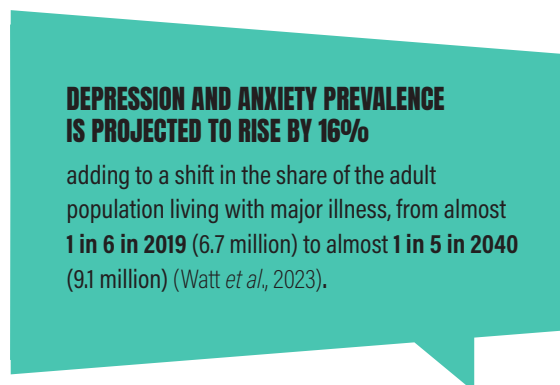
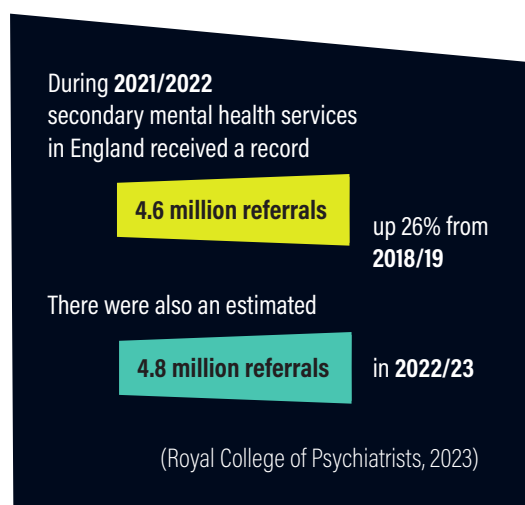
Our worsening mental health is leading to higher levels of distress across the population, unsustainable demand on expensive and over-stretched treatment services, and economic inactivity that together costs approximately £119 billion a year in England alone (O'Shea and Bell, 2020).

These risks to mental health and the poor outcomes that follow do not fall evenly across the population: people living in poverty; people with physical disabilities and illnesses; people with neurodevelopmental conditions; children in care; people from racialised communities; and LGBTQ+ people all experience much poorer mental health outcomes because of intersecting disadvantage and discrimination. In addition, the life expectancy of a person with a severe mental illness is about 20 years shorter than someone without a diagnosis, and the gap is getting bigger (Centre for Mental Health, 2021).

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE UK IS GETTING WORSE



Between 2017 and 2022, **rates of probable mental disorder among 17 to 19 year olds more than doubled** from **10% to 26%** and increased in other age groups (NHS Digital, 2022).



The situation is difficult, but there is hope for positive change if the right actions are taken to address the factors that affect mental health. We know from programmes that have seen proper investment in well governed, evidence-based and informed interventions that they can support significant improvements, reducing distress and cutting costs. These innovations have taken place under Labour, Coalition Conservative/Liberal Democrat and Conservative-led governments, and we want to engage all political parties to make further positive changes.





We recognise that our recommendations amount to a very significant financial investment. But the evidence demonstrates that, without it, the financial and human costs will be even greater as more people become more unwell. Indeed, the 2022 census carried out by the Office for National Statistics shows that half a million more people are out of the labour force due to long-term sickness (Office for National Statistics, 2022a). Children with poor mental health struggle in school and have far poorer long-term outcomes. And poor mental health often generates poor physical health, too. Our recommendations mean putting the public's wellbeing first, governing and leading the nation to a healthier and more equitable future.

PREVENTION

MORE PEOPLE WILL ENJOY GOOD MENTAL HEALTH, FEWER WILL EXPERIENCE ILL HEALTH

To improve mental health, reducing distress, disease, death and service use and boosting quality of life and economic productivity, we recommend taking a public mental health approach, recognising the importance of wider improvements to equity, diversity and social determinants of health on population wellbeing (Faculty of Public Health and Mental Health Foundation, 2016).

The evidence suggests that, by addressing the factors described below with evidence-based and informed interventions, we will both improve the general wellbeing of the population and prevent mental illness in many cases.

MENTAL HEALTH PROTECTIVE AND RISK FACTORS AMENABLE TO ACTION

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- ⊙ Secure and sufficient income
- ⊙ Fair treatment
- ⊙ Positive parenting
- ⊙ Positive school experience
- ⊙ Secure, decent housing
- ⊙ Access to healthy, natural environments
- ⊙ Exercise, healthy diet, abstinence from smoking and substances
- ⊙ Community connectivity and relationships

RISK FACTORS

- ⊙ Poverty
- ⊙ Discrimination including racism
- ⊙ Child neglect, abuse, insecure attachment
- ⊙ Bullying, excessive exam and social media pressure
- ⊙ Homelessness, poor quality, insecure housing
- ⊙ Polluted (air, water, noise), high-traffic places
- ⊙ Inactivity, poor diet, smoking, alcohol, and drug use
- ⊙ Unsafe and disconnected communities



TOP PREVENTION POLICIES

By effectively addressing social determinants (like poverty and discrimination), and environmental factors (including housing and pollution), more of us can have better mental health. Investing in more powerful public health infrastructure is also key to preventing illness and promoting better health.

Give children the best start by delivering on the Association of Directors of Public Health's call for a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030. In addition, every parent and carer needs access to effective support including evidence-based parenting programmes, and every school and college should be a mentally healthier place for children and young people.

Improve people's security by ensuring everyone can afford a healthy life with enough money and a decent home. This should include instituting a Minimum Income Guarantee, reforming sick pay legislation, and providing more social rent homes.

Create healthier physical environments by accelerating the switch to cleaner energy and transport; better incentivising insulation, active travel and public transport; ensuring everyone can access green space; and improving protection from junk food, smoking, alcohol, gambling and pollution.

Boost public mental health infrastructure putting in place a 'Mental Health Test' of government policies and restoring the public health grant to its 2015 level with an annual £1 billion boost (Health Foundation, 2021) for local councils.

EQUALITY

THE HEALTH GAPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS WILL BE CLOSED

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, health inequalities were estimated to cost the NHS an extra £4.8 billion a year, society around £31 billion in lost productivity, and £20-32 billion a year in lost tax revenue and benefit payments (Public Health England, 2021). This amounts to £68 billion a year, or the equivalent of 43% of the current NHS budget (Public Health England, 2022). A combined, well-funded response from government, public services, and the voluntary and community sector will be required to address these situations, both in terms of service provision and in identifying community needs through embedded community participation.

Mental health inequalities mean that, while it is true that anyone can experience mental ill health, the risks are much higher for certain groups who experience structural discrimination and disadvantage, with significant intersections of disadvantage compounding mental health risks. Outreach to all poorly served groups should be immediately prioritised, with focused support in areas of deprivation. It is important to note that health gaps are not caused by biological or cultural 'flaw' in affected groups but by discrimination.



People in the 10% most deprived communities



are nearly **four times as likely** to be detained under the Mental Health Act (NHS Digital, 2024)



and **twice as likely** to die by suicide (Windsor-Shellard, 2020)

as the least deprived 10%

4 TIMES as many Black people

and **TWICE** as many Asian people

are sectioned under the Mental Health Act as white people (NHS Digital, 2024)



Black people are **8 TIMES MORE LIKELY**

to be subject to a Community Treatment Order than white people (NHS Digital, 2024).

TOP EQUALITY POLICIES

Discrimination and disadvantage mean that risks to mental health are much higher in some groups, such as racialised communities. People with mental health difficulties are often treated less well in society, including in the social security and justice systems. And people with a severe mental illness have a life expectancy up to 20 years shorter than the general population. Addressing these injustices must be at the heart of creating a mentally healthier nation.

Tackle racism in all its forms. This must include ending 'hostile environment' policies, preventing school exclusions that disproportionately affect racialised children, and taking sustained action to boost race equality throughout mental health services.

Set a target to close the health gap within a decade. People with a severe mental illness shouldn't be dying up to 20 years too soon. They need fair access to health checks, stop smoking services, vaccinations and cancer screening.

Reform our social security system to ensure it treats people with mental health difficulties fairly. The Work Capability Assessment and its equivalent for Personal Independence Payment should be replaced with a fairer system of assessment for disability benefits.

Reform the justice system. This should include reducing reliance on prisons, boosting rehabilitative community sentences, and improving access to justice for people with a mental illness.

SUPPORT

EVERYONE WILL HAVE TIMELY, LOCAL ACCESS TO THE SERVICES THEY NEED

People who can benefit from mental health, social care and other support should get high-quality services when and where needed.

The NHS Long Term Plan and the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health have supported the much-needed expansion of mental health services and begun to make up for decades of underinvestment. The National Audit Office (2023) suggests that NHS mental health services have expanded for both children and adults since 2017, with significant growth in certain parts of the mental health care workforce. We recognise and welcome this growth.

However, the pandemic has significantly increased demand for mental health support, the cost-of-living crisis is likely to exacerbate it further, and there is still much to do to address the high level of unmet need. NHS England has estimated that at least 1.2 million people are on mental health waiting lists. In 2024, we remain a long way from the ambition of achieving 'parity of esteem' for mental health services compared with physical health care. Partnership between voluntary and community sector, local authority and NHS funded services will be essential, and sustainable funding for all three sectors is needed to expand support services to meet the growing national mental health need.

TOP SUPPORT POLICIES

With the right support from properly resourced services, people are more likely to enjoy better mental health outcomes. Investing in mental health and social care works. No one should struggle to get help for their mental health, or be sent to hospital far from home. Services should meet everyone's needs with a minimum use of coercion, backed up by a modernised Mental Health Act.

Fund mental health services fairly. The Government must make a long-term commitment to funding NHS mental health services and local authority social care at levels that enable them to expand the workforce sufficiently to meet rising levels of need.

Tackle long waits for mental health support by implementing new access and waiting time standards for both child and adult mental health services, with sufficient resources to achieve them.

Give children and young people easy access to mental health support. Expand Mental Health Support Teams to all schools and colleges in England and fund a nationwide network of early support hubs for young people in every local authority area.

Modernise the Mental Health Act to reduce the use of coercion and tackle racial disparities in the mental health system. This must be backed up by investment in the mental health estate and action to address safety concerns in mental health hospitals.

CONCLUSION

The nation's mental health is a precious resource. Securing better mental health for more people will create a happier, healthier and more prosperous future for us all.

Sustained and concerted action and leadership from government is at the heart of making that possible. While our mental health is made in the communities we live and work in, government policies and decisions have big impacts on our chances of having good or poor mental health. And for people living with mental health difficulties, decisions made in government can have profound consequences.

England needs a comprehensive long-term plan for mental health and wellbeing to begin in the first year of the new parliament. With a strategic approach to the nation's mental health, the Government can craft a coordinated plan that will give more people a better chance of a mentally healthy life. By instituting a 'mental health in all policies' approach, the Government can embed a new way of making decisions that will benefit all of us. And by committing to the long-term improvement of mental health services, we can make 'parity' a reality, not a false promise.

The recommendations we have made in this document are drawn from many years of research and from the knowledge and experience of many thousands of people who live with mental health difficulties and work in mental health services. Their voices deserve to be heard.

Our recommendations are not an exhaustive list of all the contents of a government mental health strategy. But we believe they are the essential elements that are necessary to turn the tide on rising levels of mental ill health and growing demand for mental health support. We cannot continue as we are. Too many people's lives are being affected by mental illness, without the right support being there when they need it. People are dying too soon.

We know that this can change. Since 2019, in the most challenging of times, the NHS in England has expanded mental health services and grown the workforce. New mental health teams are being set up in schools, primary care and maternity services, and more people are getting physical health checks. So this must be sustained, and accompanied by investment in social care and public health.

But we need to have as much focus on what creates good mental health as we do on treating mental ill health. Both are of equal importance, and both require long-term planning and commitment from national government as well as the NHS, local councils, business and civil society. A comprehensive national plan will help to create the conditions for the nation's mental health to thrive. It's time to start work and build a mentally healthier nation.

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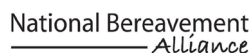
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TAKE ACTION

The nation's mental health is a precious resource. Securing better mental health for more people will create a fairer, healthier, and more prosperous future for us all. We're calling on MPs and parliamentary candidates to adopt these policies, include them in their parties' election manifestoes, and deliver them in government.





Scan the QR code for the full report, or visit
www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/mentally-healthier-nation