Mental Health
Foundation
Northern Ireland

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 Northern Ireland.

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 or email publicaffairs@mentalhealth.org.uk

Tackling the root causes of poor mental health

Too many people in Northern Ireland experience mental distress that could be prevented.

All political parties in Northern Ireland agree that mental health is important, yet there is no sustained programme to prevent mental health problems.

Who will commit to taking action that empowers every person and community in Northern Ireland to thrive with good mental health?

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 Northern Ireland economy £3.4 billion each year.

As we emerge from the Coronavirus pandemic, it is critical that the Northern Ireland Executive invests in strategies to prevent mental health problems in all stages of life.

For too long we've been firefighting by supporting people in crisis – dealing with people's mental wellbeing only after difficulties have arisen and pouring resources into clinical services which can't meet demand.

While people in distress should get quick access to the right support and treatment, waiting for problems to arise before taking action won't reduce the number of people experiencing mental health problems. **We must focus our efforts on prevention that tackles the root causes of poor mental health**, or we will continue to see people suffer while stuck on long waiting lists for treatment.

Mental health problems of all kinds can be prevented

Our mental health is affected by a range of social and environmental factors that interact with our own biological susceptibility and family circumstances. Effective interventions exist to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems.[4] Tackling the causes of poor mental health must be front and centre in our efforts to reduce instances of emotional and psychological distress.

Following the publication of the Mental Health Strategy 2021–2031, now is the time for political parties to demonstrate the value they place on mental health through clear commitments to delivering good mental health for all.

Northern Ireland has the highest rates of poor mental health of any of the four UK jurisdictions

Mental health problems are the single largest cause of ill health and disability in Northern Ireland.

One in five adults in Northern Ireland have experienced a mental health problem, a rate 25% higher than in England.[1]

Prior to the pandemic, one in eight children had an emotional difficulty indicating psychological distress.[2] Northern Ireland also has the highest levels of maternal mental health problems within the UK.[3]

Mental health problems are currently costing the Northern Ireland economy **£3.4 billion each year**.

Five asks to support better mental health for all

Now is the time for our political parties to get behind the prevention agenda. The following five asks are ambitious, evidence-led recommendations which can reduce prevalence of distress, improve overall wellbeing and save lives.

1

DELIVER A PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION MENTAL HEALTH ACTION PLAN WITHIN TWELVE MONTHS

There is an urgent need to deliver an action plan for promoting mental health through early intervention and prevention, as set out in the Mental Health Strategy 2021-31. This will require an investment of £12.31 million, identified as part of a wider £1.2 billion funding package needed over the next 10 years to implement the overall strategy which should be committed to by the next Executive.

Mental health problems of all kinds can be prevented. We now know that our genes do not set our destiny. While our genes may make us slightly more susceptible to developing a mental problem, there are a wide range of social, economic, family and emotional factors that influence our mental health outcomes.

There is good evidence that a variety of interventions can reduce levels of mental health problems. Cost-effective interventions include programmes to support parenting, the early identification of distress among new parents, rapid provision of psychological therapy, anti-bullying programmes in schools and supporting older people to engage in activities that reduce social isolation.[5]

2

REDUCE THE MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES, BUILDING A MENTAL HEALTH LENS INTO STRATEGIES TO REDUCE POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The Department for Communities' social inclusion strategies are a key means of reducing the mental health effects of social and economic inequalities. Their impact on mental health should be measured.

Social and economic inequalities lead to mental health inequalities. Social groups such as women and girls, people with disabilities, those in the LGBT+ community, people from ethnic minority communities including Travellers, and other social groups being at higher risk of developing a mental health problem. Poverty is a fundamental driver of poor mental health, and eighteen per cent of the population of Northern Ireland living in poverty.[6]

Children in the most deprived areas here have been found to have higher overall rates of emotional and behavioural problems, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems than children in the least deprived areas.[7]

In the same study, almost a third of parents in the most deprived areas in the region reported mental health problems (31.9%) compared to less than one-fifth of those in the least deprived areas.[8]
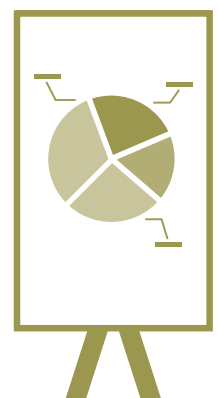
3

CREATE A COMMUNITIES MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING FUND TO SUPPORT GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

A Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund should be considered to build capacity within local community groups. Through small grants, the fund will enable local communities to engage in activities that support mental health and wellbeing, social connectedness, recovery and creativity. An initial investment of £2 million would be needed. Local community organisations can play a vital role in supporting resilience, social connection, and good mental health, as demonstrated during the pandemic. Often operating with very low funds, community organisations have the potential to substantially contribute to improving mental health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

UPSKILL TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF TO PROVIDE APPROPRIATE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT

4

Capacity-building training in mental health should be widely available to teachers in Northern Ireland – helping them recognise signs of difficulty and how to respond. This would represent one step towards full implementation of the Department for Education's Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.

The Framework provides a valuable good practice basis for creating mentally healthy schools. Incorporating a Whole School Approach, it recognises that teachers, pastoral care and other school staff all have a role to play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students. Education staff often feel inadequately prepared to support children's mental health. They need to understand both the positive role they can play in building students' resilience and coping skills, and their important prevention and early intervention role in recognising signs of mental distress and responding appropriately to their role.

5

EVERY AT RISK CHILD OR ADOLESCENT SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO A MENTORING PROGRAMME

The Executive should invest in evidence-based mentoring programmes based on the one good adult model and expand existing programmes to ensure that all children at risk across Northern Ireland have the opportunity to receive mentoring support.

Research has shown that one of the strongest predictors of good mental health amongst young people is the presence of at least 'one good adult', who they can dependably turn to for guidance and support.[9] A large survey of young people in the Republic of Ireland found that the presence of such an individual was associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression and greater levels of good life satisfaction, high self-esteem, healthy coping strategies and optimism for the future.[10] However, not all young people feel they have a trusted adult they can go to for advice and support, if they are experiencing a problem.[11]

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