

DHSC Mental Health & Wellbeing Plan

Response to call for evidence

July 2022

**Led by the Sport, Mental Health & Wellbeing Steering Group of the
Sport for Development Coalition**

Executive summary

This response to the call for evidence on the DHSC Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan is led by the Sport, Mental Health and Wellbeing Steering Group of the Sport for Development Coalition.



The Sport for Development Coalition is a growing network of more than 230 charities and organisations over-arching thousands of projects and programmes using sport and physical activity to tackle key health and societal inequalities across the UK. ‘Improved health and wellbeing’ is a core strand of the Coalition’s #OpenGoal shared advocacy framework, launched in April 2022, and follows the publication of the ‘Moving for Mental Health’ report (January 2022) in partnership with Mind, which features submissions from more

than 70 Coalition members and experts by experience.

A key recommendation of ‘Moving for Mental Health’ is for a co-ordinated approach across Government to working with the sports sector to improve mental health. To support this, this response highlights research and evidence, and insight from experts by experience, supporting the role of sport and physical activity in promoting positive mental wellbeing and preventing mental ill health. It also outlines the role of sport and physical activity in improving the effectiveness of treatment and supporting people with mental health conditions to live well.

1 How can we all promote positive mental wellbeing?

- As the Coalition’s *Moving for Mental Health* report (see www.sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/moving-mental-health) outlines, there is now strong evidence of the benefits of moving and engaging in sport and physical activity for positive mental health, and we would want this to be recognized in any cross-Government mental health strategy.
- Moving more and engaging in sport and physical activity can improve mood, reduce stress and anxiety, reduce the risk of developing depression, support improved sleep, increase self-esteem and

social connections, and help people to manage the side-effects of medication.

- The evidence, and testimonies of experts by experience, clearly demonstrates that promoting positive mental health should focus on building a healthy relationship with sport, physical activity and moving more.
- Promoting positive mental health and behaviour change through sport, physical activity and movement should be tailored to the needs and preferences of specific social groups, and take account of the intersectionality of people's identities. Evidence suggests blanket, one-size-fits-all, approaches are unlikely to work ([Mind, 2021](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#)).

2 How can we all prevent the onset of mental ill health?

- It is essential that the social determinants of mental health, and longstanding social and health inequalities which have been made worse by COVID-19, are tackled if we are to prevent the onset of mental ill health and the spiralling economic and social costs incurred by mental ill health ([Centre for Mental Health, 2022](#); [Marmot et al., 2020](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#)).
- Cross-sector partnerships between sport and physical activity and mental health organisations have been shown to be socially acceptable ways of reaching new

audiences and engaging them in non-stigmatising, non-clinical, conversations about mental health and suicide.

Case study

Wesport Active Partnership offers a holistic social prescribing service through GP surgeries aimed at people with long-term mental or physical health problems and/or welfare issues. All participants saw improvements to their mental and physical health through mental wellbeing scores. Project leaders explained a collaborative partnership between the GP surgery and the community project workers was crucial for the long-term impact of the programme, and to help recruit clients. This kind of collaborative working between primary care and community programmes is particularly critical for movement and mental health programmes.

- Inclusive, non-threatening, locally relevant and safe sport and physical activity organisations/programmes are important community assets or hubs that can prevent mental ill health among people of all social groups.
- The co-design, implementation and evaluation of evidence-based, person-centred, sport and physical activity mental health programmes which involve experts by experience, diverse community stakeholders (including peer leaders and mentors), and academic researchers are

most effective in preventing the onset of mental ill-health ([Mind, 2021](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#)).

3 How can we all intervene earlier when people need support with their mental health?

- Community sport and physical activity providers, and groups including sports coaches and volunteers, are well positioned to build conversations about mental health into their place-based work. With appropriate support, they have been shown to help engage people with mental health problems, and can effectively spot the signs of mental ill-health and signpost people to further mental health support ([Mind, 2021](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#); [Vella et al., 2021](#)).

Case study

Thirty-three clinical and non-clinical staff at **Two Rivers Medical Practice** received physical activity training from **Active Suffolk**. Initial findings indicated that the project successfully increased physical activity behaviours and access to local services and activities.

- Community sport and physical activity organisations can help to prevent people with poor mental health requiring specialist treatment and support, reduce waiting times, and help reduce prescription costs, by enabling them to enjoy the mental health benefits of being active and moving more.

3.1 Supporting children and young people

- Empathetic sports coaches, peer support workers, and locally trusted organisations play a key role in supporting children and young people with their mental health, and in preventing them from engaging in child and adolescent mental health services or reducing the amount and kind of support needed where they do ([Mind, 2021](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#); [Vella et al., 2021](#)).
- Sport and education are important opportunities to engage large numbers of people (especially children and young people) where early intervention can complement other safeguarding and welfare-related activities to improve mental health.

4 How can we improve the quality and effectiveness of treatment for mental health conditions?

- Physical activity and exercise are under-rated and under-used as complementary therapeutic approaches to medication and talking therapies in the treatment of poor mental health ([Smith et al., 2022](#); [Stubbs et al., 2018](#)). It is important that primary and secondary healthcare professionals are educated and supported to embed physical activity and exercise into mental health treatment pathways.
- When prescribing physical activity and exercise to people with poor mental health, healthcare professionals should adopt a person-centred, evidence-based, approach and carefully consider the person's previous experiences, preferences and support needs to engage in physical activity and exercise. This approach has been adopted successfully in the Moving Medicine, Active Hospitals and Physical Activity Clinical Champions programmes which have improved treatment effectiveness ([Smith et al., 2022](#)).
- Cross-sector partnerships involving secondary health care professionals, peer

support workers and social prescription link workers working alongside community providers of sport, physical activity and exercise should be developed to better support people to access more appropriate and effective treatment for their mental health ([Smith et al., 2022](#)).

Case study

We Care Stockport and Ealing IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) services worked collaboratively with their local secondary care (mental health care and services for people who are homeless or seeking shelter from abuse) to deliver movement sessions to support mental wellbeing. Both programmes showed successful outcomes, including improvements in mental health symptoms, reductions in social isolation and improved motivation and confidence to exercise. Despite overall positive results, there were notable challenges. Over 60% of participants indicated there is insufficient availability of physical activity in their local area that met their needs.

- The provision of dedicated mental health programmes for people with mental health problems, and regular physical health checks for people with severe

mental illness, are particularly crucial for improving the effectiveness of future mental health treatment approaches.

- These approaches reduce waiting times, can support the provision of Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services, help mitigate the side-effects of medication including weight gain, and can complement social prescribing programmes where these take appropriate account of the needs of people with poor mental health (especially those with social anxiety, those who have nobody to be active with, and those with fears of meeting new people and places).

5 How can we all support people living with mental health conditions to live well?

- Tackling the stigma, discrimination and other health impacts associated with longstanding social and health inequalities is crucial to enabling people living with mental health conditions to live well, lead fulfilling lives, and continue in employment, education and training ([Centre for Mental Health, 2022](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#)).

- Normalising mental health conversations and signposting to relevant, accessible and inclusive opportunities for people with poor mental health to be active will improve the mental and physical health of people with mental health conditions, and enable them to live well. This should be part of a wider cultural shift in the current lack of parity of esteem, and associated stigma and discrimination, experienced by people with poor mental health.

Case study

Oxford NHS Trust ran a quality improvement project to embed physical activity into mental health pathways. The project delivered Mind's Mental Health Awareness in Sport and Physical Activity (MHASPA+) training to over 200 coaches, instructors and therapists in the network. Clinicians reported physical activity consultations were relevant to most of the people they assessed. However, project evaluators reported partnerships between mental health and sport and physical activity providers was key to ensure the programme's sustainability and share success. It was also noted that a 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate for secondary mental health care services - targeted strategies to engage multiple audiences were needed.

- People with mental health problems have emphasised that mental health training should have the same parity as physical first aid and safeguarding training, and this training should be mandatory for the sport, physical activity and healthcare workforces (Smith et al., 2022).



- However, if those in the sport, physical activity and exercise sectors are required to support someone in crisis, it is important that they are educated about how, when, and where to refer to relevant crisis support services. This might involve contacting the emergency services directly, or seeking specialist support from support services including the Samaritans, the Hub of Hope, and Shout.

6 How can we all improve support for people in crisis?

- Although sport, physical activity and exercise can be beneficial in the prevention, treatment and management of poor mental health, these are not typically appropriate first-choice solutions for supporting people in crisis. Crisis response requires dedicated, highly specialised, person-centred mental health services delivered in a timely manner by appropriately qualified professionals when it is needed.

Contact us



020 7976 3900



coalition@sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org



Holborn Tower, 137-145 High Holborn,
London, WC1V 6PL

