Director of Public Health Annual Report 2023

# Mental Health Matters

- Executive Summary -
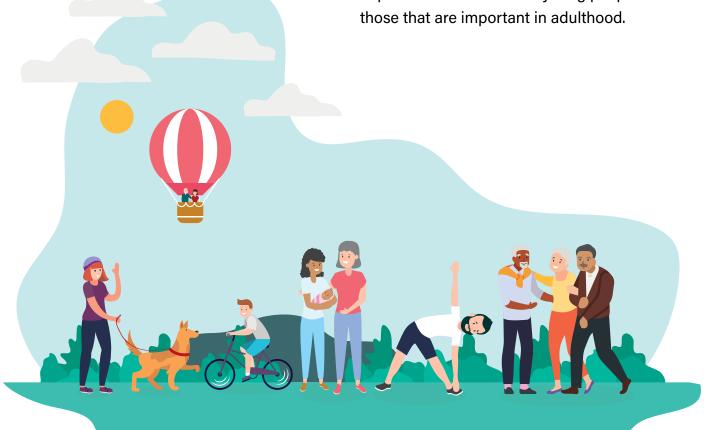
*Be kind to your mind*

# Executive Summary

Mental health is as important as physical health for our health and wellbeing. It underpins our ability to build strong relationships, to do well at school or in our jobs, and shapes how we interact with the world around us. Good mental health often leads to better physical health as well as a reduced chance of dying at a younger age.

People in Buckinghamshire generally enjoy higher levels of good mental health and wellbeing compared with the England average. However, good mental health is not experienced by everyone and many of us will experience periods of poor mental health during our life. Fortunately, there are many things we can do to improve and protect our own mental health. There are also actions that schools and organisations can take to support the mental health of those who live, learn and work in Buckinghamshire.

These preventative actions are the focus of my annual report this year. The report does not consider the different types of mental health conditions and does not cover treatment and support for mental illness. These are important subjects that would require a long and detailed report in their own right. Many people with a mental health condition enjoy a good quality of life and many of the preventative actions in my annual report may support them, in addition to formal treatment.

Promoting mental health in the three key life stages – Start Well, Live Well and Age Well

Using formal research and local data, it is possible to identify the things that promote and protect our mental health and the factors that can have a negative impact. These are listed in the table below and considered in more detail in the main report. It is not surprising to find a strong overlap between the factors that are important to children and young people and those that are important in adulthood.

# Factors that promote and protect our mental health

## Children and Young People

- Support for the mental health of mothers during pregnancy
- Mental health of fathers and a supportive family
- Having support from friends
- A positive school environment
- Physical activity
- Being around nature
- Involvement with arts and music

## Adults

- Physical activity
- Getting enough sleep
- Having a good diet
- Quitting smoking
- Having a social network
- Ongoing learning
- Being around nature
- Involvement with arts and music
- Good quality work
- Volunteering
- Mindfulness

# Things that can have a negative impact

## Children and Young People

- Traumatic events in childhood
- Living in poor quality homes and neighbourhoods
- Bullying
- The internet and social media
- Caring responsibilities (without support)

## Adults

- Drinking too much alcohol
- Gambling
- Living in poor quality homes and neighbourhoods
- Worrying about money
- Unpaid caring responsibilities (without support)

The things that affect our mental health do not change as we grow older. However, two additional factors become important at the Age Well stage – the impact of retirement and increased risks of becoming socially isolated.

# Who is most at risk of poor mental health?

While the factors listed above can affect everyone, some people in Buckinghamshire are more likely to be vulnerable to poor mental health.

National research has demonstrated a link between poverty and mental health and this is evident in Buckinghamshire. Data from before the pandemic found that people living in the most deprived fifth of Buckinghamshire were more than twice as likely to have an emergency admission for mental health or self-harm compared with those living in the least deprived fifth of the county.

Women in England are three times more likely than men to experience common mental health problems, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders. However, men have a much higher risk of dying by suicide.

People who belong to particular groups are also more likely to experience poorer mental health than others. This includes people with physical health conditions, people from some ethnic groups, people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, some people who are neurodiverse (see glossary), and those with caring responsibilities.

# Promoting mental health in Buckinghamshire

While not all mental health conditions and disorders can be prevented, individuals can take steps to improve their own mental health by focusing on the protective factors listed in the tables above. The practical actions people can take are included in the main report alongside information about advice where people can seek support if they need it.

# Recommendations

There is a lot that individuals can do to support their own mental health, actions are outlined in information accompanying this report. Schools and other organisations can also play an important role in promoting the mental health of everyone who lives and works in Buckinghamshire. This final section considers what schools, the Council, health, employers and voluntary sector organisations can do to provide proactive support to promote good mental health.

## 1. Support our children, young people and their families

We need to ensure our children and young people have the best start in life. Given that many mental health conditions start in childhood, supporting children, young people and their families can also promote the mental health of our entire population.

- Promote the mental health and wellbeing of families, from pregnancy and during the child's early years, through parenting support programmes and programmes that encourage physical activity and social interaction.
- Increase the number of schools who take a whole-school approach to mental health by adopting actions to tackle bullying, to teach pupils how to stay safe online, and to promote social and emotional learning. This includes encouraging schools to apply for Department of Education funding to identify and train a senior mental health lead.

- Support organisations working outside of school settings to deliver projects that help children and young people to develop skills that support their mental health and wellbeing. This is particularly important for those children and young people who are most at risk of mental health problems because of where they live or the group they belong to.
- Support projects that promote the things that have been shown to protect the mental health of children, young people and their families. This might include promoting physical activity, encouraging family time or building strong communities. Play Streets are a good example of this.

## 2. Encourage lifestyles that protect mental health

There is a direct link between people's lifestyle and their mental health. A healthy lifestyle protects both physical and mental health. Many organisations across Buckinghamshire are already promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting individuals to make changes to how they live their life, whether that is becoming more active, adopting a different diet, limiting the amount of alcohol they drink or giving up smoking.

There is, however, always more that can be done. For example, improving the quality of our green and blue public spaces and transport to them, has the potential to allow people to connect more with nature.

## 3. Provide opportunities for people to build their social network, learn new skills and give to others

Having support from friends is important to the mental health of children and adults alike. As we get older, life events – such as retirement, changes to physical health, and bereavement – can lead to changes in our social network and leave people feeling more isolated and lonely. Learning a new skill or helping others through volunteering has also been demonstrated to help protect mental health. While individuals are best placed to determine what works for them, there are many actions that organisations can take to provide opportunities for people to build their social network, learn a skill, or give to others, often by signposting people to where to find information.

- Support Healthy Libraries which act as community hubs to support the health and mental wellbeing of the whole local community.
- Promote opportunities for volunteering to enable more people to receive the mental health benefits associated with helping others.
- Develop our Healthy Ageing Strategy, incorporating an age friendly approach which supports social interaction, the development of intergenerational activities, volunteering, adult learning and age friendly employment.
- Buckinghamshire Council, the NHS and wider partners should work together to promote support for 'Digital Inclusion' to ensure residents have access to information and support when they need it. This should include support for people who currently struggle using computers and other technology and ways to increase access to affordable equipment for people where cost is a barrier. This will also help more people to use the internet to keep in touch with friends and family, build their social network, access information and learn new skills. There should also be alternative ways of accessing information for those who cannot, or choose not, to go online.

## 4. Take action on the things that increase people's risk of poorer mental health

While the factors examined in this report can affect everyone, some people are more likely to experience poor mental health than others. This includes people who are struggling financially and people who belong to particular groups such as men, some ethnic groups, people with physical health problems, carers and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

- Utilise the Opportunity Bucks programme to help address the issues such as financial insecurity, skills, good quality employment and housing.
- Ensure that people who are struggling financially know where and how to access support and advice. Complement this by providing mental health and suicide prevention training to those working in services that support people experiencing financial difficulty.
- Consider the needs of the groups most at risk of poorer mental health and design actions to address their particular needs.

## 5. Encourage open conversations about mental health

Too many people still feel uncomfortable talking about their mental health. Communities and organisations can tackle this by encouraging open conversations about mental health and by taking steps to reassure people that they won't be discriminated against if they talk about their mental health or seek support.

- Encourage conversations about mental health in everyday settings.
- Promotional campaigns such as Champion the Change, encourage open conversations about mental health, including actions to target specific groups known to be reluctant to talk about their mental health.

Please see main report for how to take action to improve your mental health and get help.

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Director of Public Health and Community Safety Buckinghamshire Council

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