

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK is facing a significant mental health crisis which is having an adverse impact on individuals' quality of life and our collective endeavours as a nation. The most recently published *NHS Adult Psychiatric Morbidity survey* from 2014 found that one in six adults in England had a common mental health condition, which included a range of diagnosable anxiety and depressive disorders. The scale of the problem has increased at a concerning rate in recent years - especially among young people. The 2023 Mental Health of Children and Young People in England survey found that around 20% of 8 to 16 year olds had a probable mental health disorder, up from 12.5% in 2017. Overall, the survey found that one in five people aged 8 to 25 living in England had a probable mental health disorder in 2023.

The problem is urgent - according to research by the London School of Economics, mental health problems cost the economy around £118 billion a year. Further, official forecasts have predicted that spending on disability benefits will rise by £17 billion a year by 2030, with mental health conditions being the most expensive conditions contributing to these costs. In addition, NHS mental health services in England received a record 4.6 million referrals during 2022, up 22% from 2019.

While the UK Government has developed a number of strategies and approaches to improve mental health, these have mostly focused on increasing spending on mental health care. Demos has estimated that if recent trends continue, NHS England spending on mental health will reach £37.6 billion by 2040, overtaking the £32.4 billion that the UK government currently spends on defence. While investment in mental health care is welcomed and undoubtedly vital for those who are already suffering from severe mental health problems, more must be done to prevent mental ill-health.

In *The Preventative State*, Demos called for a bold new approach to prevention which gets radically upstream; fixing the foundations, not always jumping to design a new service or intervention.

In a mental health context, these foundations include our emotional health: the skills and beliefs which shape our feelings, thoughts and behaviours in relation to our social and emotional functioning. The emotional health model that has been developed by The Centre for Emotional Health outlines seven social and emotional competencies that can help us to understand and manage our own emotions and behaviours, as well as develop supportive and healthy relationships with those around us. In our previous paper, we explored the concept of emotional health and the critical role it can play as a protective factor for mental health.

In this second paper we will set out our recommendations for how the government can achieve good emotional health for all.

## WHY EMOTIONAL HEALTH IS CRITICAL FOR MENTAL HEALTH

In the first paper *Strong Foundations: Why emotional health is critical for mental health*, we highlighted how emotional health can play a crucial role in promoting the foundations of good mental health, by equipping individuals, families and communities with skills and resources to protect their mental health. Having good emotional health has been associated with improved mental health outcomes. For example, a 2015 study by the Early Intervention Foundation found that the strength of someone's emotional skills during childhood can be a predictor of their mental health in adult life. Further, a 2014 study found that emotional health in childhood is the most important predictor of adult life satisfaction - a factor that can substantially influence mental health and wellbeing - even more so than intellectual development and family income.

The role of interpersonal relationships is particularly important here. Having good emotional health can help us develop and maintain positive relationships by enabling us to be aware of and manage the beliefs we hold about others, our social awareness

and our relationship skills. In turn, good relationships help us to develop and maintain good emotional health, it's a reciprocal process. Healthy and supportive relationships are a vital protective factor for mental health - according to the Mental Health Foundation, studies have shown that negative social interactions and relationships, especially with partners and spouses, have been found to increase the risk of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. On the other hand, positive interactions reduce the risk of these negative mental health outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that the existing research has not established a cause-effect relationship between emotional health and mental health outcomes. However, the evidence does show a strong association between them even when other determinants have been accounted for, such as socioeconomic status. It is likely then that emotional health does have a significant level of influence over people's mental health outcomes. This does not mean that tackling risk factors such as poverty, poor quality housing and experiences of discrimination are unimportant in efforts to prevent mental ill-health - they are crucial. Emotional health should be looked at as one of a number of critical factors that can help protect and promote good mental health.

## **THE LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY IN PREVENTING MENTAL ILL-HEALTH**

Currently, the government lacks a clear and comprehensive plan on preventing mental ill-health, accompanied by limited consideration of the importance of emotional health and the mechanisms that can be put in place to achieve good emotional health for all. This feels extremely out of step with the needs of the nation given the scale and societal and economic impacts of mental health problems.

In 2022, the government introduced the Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan which demonstrated a comprehensive, cross-government commitment to preventing mental ill health. However, in January 2023, this plan was scrapped and replaced with the Major Conditions Strategy which addresses mental health alongside a range of physical health issues. While the strategy recognises the importance of prevention through addressing the wider determinants of health and empowering people to live healthy lives, there is limited detail on how this can be done in relation to mental health and appears too narrow in scope to achieve systemic change.

Efforts to develop people's emotional health are most prevalent in government education policy in the form of Social and Emotional Learning in schools. However, lack of clear government guidance, time and ongoing training have been cited by teachers as barriers to implementing effective emotional learning and the government has been criticised for deprioritising emotional learning.

To take a truly preventative approach to tackling mental-ill health, there needs to be much greater value and investment from the government placed on developing foundational policy that can enable and empower people to look after their mental and emotional health. Polling carried out by YouGov for The Centre for Emotional Health found that 70% of people believe that it is important for the government to invest in education and training to develop good emotional health.<sup>1</sup> Supporting everyone, at all stages of their life, to develop and utilise their emotional health assets must be a crucial part in building the foundations of good mental health.

<sup>1</sup> All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2094 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 17th - 18th January 2024. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

**TABLE 1**  
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACHIEVING GOOD EMOTIONAL HEALTH FOR ALL

PROBLEM	POLICY SOLUTIONS
<p>There is currently no standalone, comprehensive cross-government plan for preventing mental ill-health.</p> <p>Mental health is considered alongside a range of physical health conditions in The Major Conditions Strategy. However, the strategy lacks clear detail on how everyone can be supported and empowered to look after and protect their mental health. Further, combining mental and physical health conditions into one strategy appears to have left insufficient scope for the complex and pertinent risk factors of mental ill-health to be truly addressed.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. The UK Government should re-commit to a cross-government mental health and wellbeing plan.</b> A preventative, strengths and asset-based approach that recognises the importance of good emotional health for empowering people to look after their mental health should form the basis of this plan.</li> <li><b>2. The UK Government should incorporate emotional health into a long-term plan to ensure that all aspects of health are considered in all policies.</b> For example, the impact of different government policies, from housing to education, on enabling and disabling people’s emotional health assets and skills should be considered. This would build on ideas such as Labour’s mission-led approach to government.</li> </ol>
<p>Efforts to implement emotional learning in schools and support children and young people’s emotional development are often undervalued and inconsistent.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>3. Researchers should aim to build the evidence base around the causal link between emotional health and improved mental health outcomes,</b> helping to demonstrate the value of emotional health as a protective factor for good mental health.</li> <li><b>4. The Department for Education should develop clear evidence-based guidance for schools and colleges on how to best implement learning about emotional health.</b> This guidance should be co-designed with teachers and students to ensure the implementation of learning about emotional health is good-quality, effective and sufficiently accounts for the barriers schools currently face to supporting young people’s emotional development.</li> </ol>
<p>A person’s emotional health is impacted by the psychosocial environments they are in, and we know that many people are not in ‘emotionally healthy’ environments.</p> <p>For example, loneliness, toxic workplace cultures, poor family relationships, and experiences of poverty can be barriers to people having good emotional health as well as risk factors for poor mental health.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>5. The UK Government should address the foundational factors that influence people’s emotional and mental health.</b> As Demos argued in <i>The Preventative State</i>, we need to see a shift towards investing in foundational factors that affect people’s lives directly; we called this foundational policy. These should include:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>a.</b> Measures to directly reduce poverty, such as income and benefits payments.</li> <li><b>b.</b> Efforts to strengthen social capital and social networks locally.</li> </ol> </li> <li><b>6. The UK government should consider ways it can better support local government and relevant civil society organisations</b> to create spaces that support relationship building and community cohesion.</li> </ol>

**PROBLEM**

**POLICY SOLUTIONS**

**7. The UK government should invest in evidence-based training and programmes on emotional health** that can be delivered in and tailored to a range of settings including workplaces, families, educational institutions (such as alternative education providers), prisons and in local communities.

Those designing and delivering this training should also consider how to best incentivise uptake. For example, workplaces may be more likely to take up emotional health training if it can be shown to also support workers' professional development.