



Director of Public Health Annual Report 2023

Mental Health Matters

Be kind to your mind



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Introduction

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.¹

People in Buckinghamshire generally enjoy higher levels of good mental health and wellbeing compared with the England average. However, many of us will experience periods of poor mental health during our life. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted this with many people struggling to adapt to the sudden changes this brought, while the recent rises in the cost of living have created pressures that are affecting many people's mental health.

While not all mental health conditions and disorders can be prevented, there are many things we can do to improve and protect our own mental health. There are also actions that families, communities, schools and organisations can take to support the mental health of those who live, learn and work in Buckinghamshire. This is the focus of my annual report this year.

The report summarises the things that can promote and protect mental health and examines the factors that can have a negative effect on our mental health. It also highlights who in Buckinghamshire is more likely to be vulnerable to poor mental health. To align with our Health and Wellbeing Strategy, this research is presented for each of the three key life stages – Start Well, Live Well and Age Well.

In the final section, I make a number of recommendations regarding actions that individuals, communities, schools, Buckinghamshire Council, the local NHS, employers and voluntary sector organisations can take to promote good mental health.

In taking this public health approach, it is important to acknowledge that a proportion of people in our area will continue to experience poor mental health, ranging from anxiety to severe mental illness. People with poorer mental health need support and treatment. This is an important topic which would require a long and detailed report in its own right and is not addressed here. Many people with a mental health condition enjoy a good quality of life and many of the preventive actions in my report may also support their mental health in addition to formal treatment.

I would ask all organisations, individuals and communities in Buckinghamshire to consider what you can do to improve mental health in our county.

Dr Jane O'Grady

Director of Public Health and Community Safety
Buckinghamshire Council

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their contribution to this report...

Louise Hurst	Sana Hasan
Zoe Cookson	Caroline Thickens
Stephen Pinel	Nicola Higgins
Ruth Passmore	Sonia Storey
Emily Lewis	Aaron Percival

What do we mean by mental health?

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as “a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”²

Mental well-being is often measured through “quality of life” indicators³ which include things that are important for mental health such as our personal relationships and finances.⁴

Many people have good mental health. However, this can change over time. Our mental health is affected by situations and changes in our lives and these can, for some people, lead to mental health conditions⁵ and disorders.

At any point in time about 1 in 6 people in England are affected by common mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁶ Common mental health conditions may be lifelong, with periods in which symptoms are better (or gone completely) and other times when they are worse. There is wide variation in how severely these affect people but they can cause significant long-term disability.

Around 1 in every 100 patients registered with a GP in England suffer from a more severe mental illness (or “SMI”) including conditions such as schizophrenia, psychosis and bipolar disorder.⁷ These conditions may affect people’s ability to engage in everyday activities and work⁸. However, it is possible to manage many symptoms with appropriate treatment and support.⁹

Mental health conditions are common but many people don’t feel comfortable talking about their mental health. This is partly because there is still a stigma in some parts of our society about people experiencing mental health issues. This report seeks to encourage open conversations about mental health and recommends the use of [inclusive mental health language](#).



The Buckinghamshire picture

Higher than average levels of good mental health

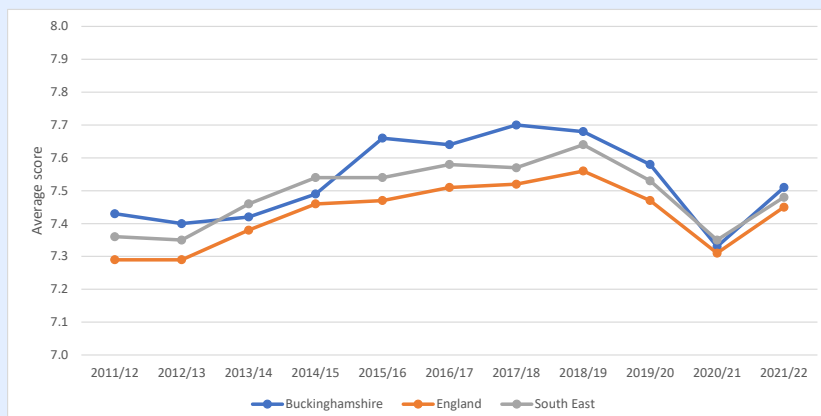
People in Buckinghamshire generally enjoy higher levels of good mental health and wellbeing compared with the England average.

The four graphs that follow illustrate this, comparing Buckinghamshire scores for four key measures of wellbeing over the last ten years with the averages for the South East region and for England as a whole. Buckinghamshire residents report higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with life, as well as a greater sense that the things they do in life are worthwhile, than the population of England. Anxiety levels in Buckinghamshire are also lower compared to the England average.

In all areas there was a drop in wellbeing measures and an increase in anxiety in 2020/21 which can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic.

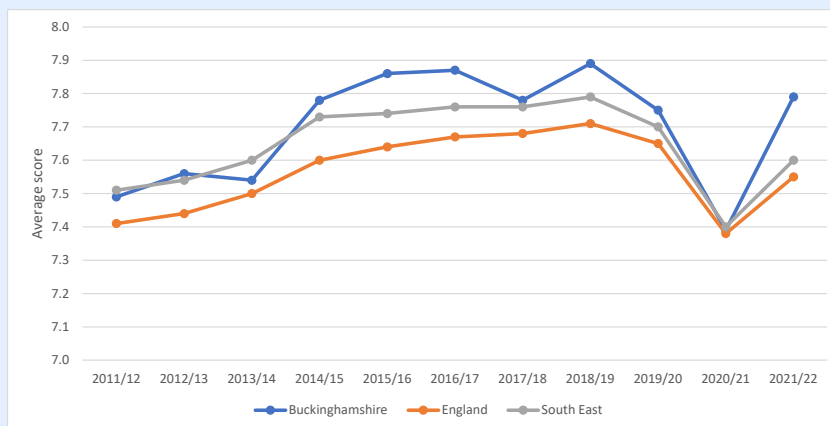


Figure 1. Measure of personal well-being (Happiness) in Buckinghamshire, compared to the South East region and England average, 2011/12 to 2021/22



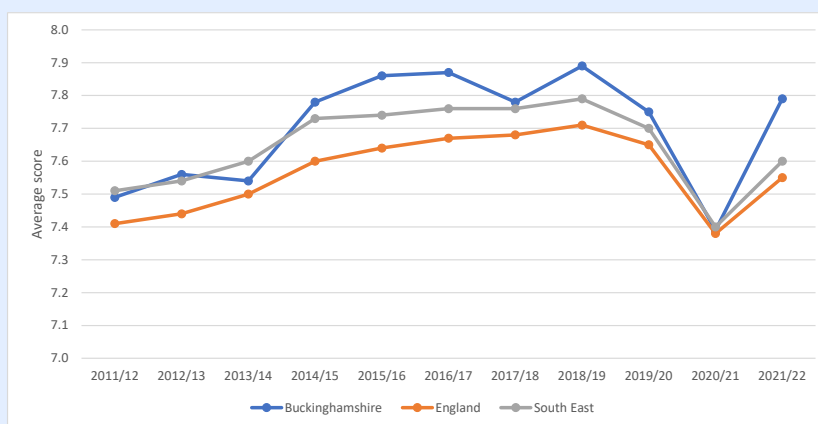
Source: Annual Population Survey (APS); Office for National Statistics (ONS). © Crown copyright 2022

Figure 2. Measure of personal well-being (Life Satisfaction) in Buckinghamshire, compared to the South East region and England average, 2011/12 to 2021/22



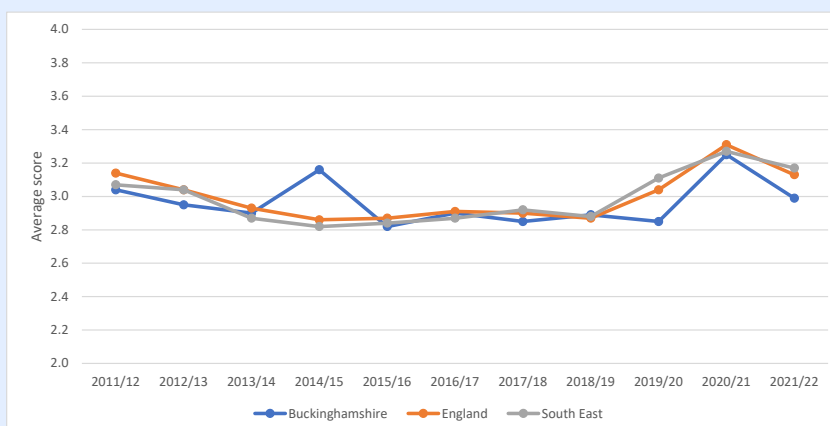
Source: Annual Population Survey (APS); Office for National Statistics (ONS). © Crown copyright 2022

Figure 3. Measure of personal well-being (Worthwhile) in Buckinghamshire, compared to the South East region and England average, 2011/12 to 2021/22



Source: Annual Population Survey (APS); Office for National Statistics (ONS). © Crown copyright 2022

Figure 4. Measure of personal well-being (Anxiety) in Buckinghamshire, compared to the South East region and England average, 2011/12 to 2021/22



Source: Annual Population Survey (APS); Office for National Statistics (ONS). © Crown copyright 2022

Lower levels of diagnosed mental health disorders

Adult rates of both diagnosed common mental health disorders and more severe mental health conditions are lower in Buckinghamshire than England. For example, 12.2% of patients registered with a GP in Buckinghamshire had a diagnosis of depression, compared with 12.7% in England. Similarly, in 2021/2022, 0.77% of registered patients in Buckinghamshire had a severe mental illness compared with 0.95% in England.

The prevalence of severe mental health illness has not changed significantly over time. However, over the last ten years there has been a steady increase in the percentage of the population diagnosed with common mental health disorders, such as depression. This reflects a national pattern.



- Start Well -



Start Well - Mental health in children and young people

The importance of promoting mental health in our children and young people

Around half of lifetime mental health conditions (excluding dementia) start before the age of 14¹⁰ and mental health problems in the teenage years have been linked to poorer wellbeing into old age.¹¹

A national survey, conducted in 2021, found that 17.4% of 6 to 16-year-olds in England are likely to have a mental health disorder ([see glossary for definition](#)).¹² Applying this percentage to the Buckinghamshire population would suggest that approximately 16,500 children in our county have a mental health condition.

There have been national reports of an increase in the number of children and young people seeking treatment for severe mental health crisis in recent years, in particular linked to the Covid-19 pandemic¹³. This is consistent with the Buckinghamshire picture where we have seen an increase in all hospital admissions for children and young people for mental health problems over the last decade.

Action to promote and protect mental health in the children of our county can have long-term benefits for our population.

Good mental health starts before you are born and is shaped by experiences in the first years of life.¹⁴ A child's emotional development is affected by the mental health of mothers during their pregnancy and the mental health of both parents after birth.

As children grow and develop other factors become important. This includes the support they receive from friends and from their school. Physical activity, contact with nature, and involvement with arts and music have also been shown to promote good mental health in children and young people.



Support for the mental health of mothers during pregnancy

The mental health of women during and immediately after their pregnancy has been shown to have a lasting impact on a child's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Good mental health care during this period has been linked to fewer early births, lower infant deaths, better school attainment and reduced depression and anxiety in children.¹⁵

Conversely, poorer mental health can have a long term negative impact on women, their partners and their children.^{16 17} Indeed, studies have linked stress of mothers during pregnancy to poorer mental health of their child in adulthood.^{18 19}

As many as 1 in 5 women experience mental health problems when they are pregnant or in the first year after they have had their baby.²⁰ For some these problems are new while for others they represent a continuation or worsening of existing mental health issues.²¹ Depression and anxiety are most common but women can be affected by the full range of mental health conditions.²²

Both international evidence and UK surveys indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic increased the risk of mental health problems for pregnant women, with factors such as reduced support and worries about money increasing the risk of anxiety and depression.^{23 24}

It is important that mental health issues in pregnancy are recognised and treated. This may require action to overcome barriers to accessing support. This includes poor awareness amongst women and health care professionals and an unwillingness to talk openly about mental ill health.²⁵



Mental health of fathers and a supportive family

The mental health of fathers is also important, especially as around 1 in 10 fathers experience perinatal depression.²⁶ The mental health of a father influences a child's emotional development²⁷ and fathers can have an important role in shaping a child's family environment²⁸ and providing a secure emotional bond.

A secure emotional bond with at least one caregiver is linked to longer term emotional health²⁹ and evidence suggests a good bond between the baby and mother or father can have immediate and long-term consequences for positive mental wellbeing.³⁰

A secure emotional bond is built on the reliability and warmth of the parent or caregiver. For example, a parent who plays with, talks to, and cuddles their baby.³¹ A parent or caregiver regularly reading to a child has been linked to improved social and emotional outcomes for both children and their parents,³² with the impact increasing the more often they read.³³

Becoming a parent can be a big change and some families benefit from extra support. Parenting programmes have been found to improve behaviour in children, reduce mental disorders, and positively impact on the mental health of parents.³⁴



Having support from friends

As well as a supportive family, having friends is important to the mental health of children and young people, particularly during the teenage years.³⁵

There is good evidence linking loneliness to poorer mental health in adults and some research to suggest that this is also the case for children and young people.³⁶ In a national survey in 2016-17, 11.3% of British children (aged 10 to 15 years) and 9.8% of young people (aged 16 to 24 years) said they were often lonely.³⁷ Loneliness was much higher in children in receipt of free school meals with more than a quarter (27.5%) saying they often felt lonely.

There is some evidence that loneliness amongst children and young people significantly increased in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁸ The 2021 OxWell survey of just over 3,000 children and young people in Buckinghamshire found that 8.3% of primary school age children often felt lonely with this figure increasing to 19% of secondary school age children, and 24.2% of young people in sixth form. A health and wellbeing survey will be conducted in 2023 and will help identify whether this has changed.

A positive school environment

Moving beyond family and friends, schools can play an important role in promoting and protecting the mental health of children and young people. NICE guidance recommends that schools take a “whole school approach” to mental health, adopting a culture and ethos that supports the mental health of both children and staff.

A positive school environment can help children and young people develop skills in social, emotional and mental wellbeing both through the curriculum³⁹ and through activities outside the classroom, including through play.

Schools are also uniquely placed to identify and provide targeted support for children at risk of worse social, emotional and mental health as well as support during life changes that have the potential to impact on mental health.^{40 41}



Physical activity

Physical activity is linked to many factors that promote better mental health, including improved sleep⁴², higher self-esteem and self-confidence, reduced anxiety⁴³ and lower depression⁴⁴. For example, one English study found that just one hour of light physical activity each day resulted in a lower depression score (by between 8-11%) for children and young people aged 12-16 years.⁴⁵

Children and young people should aim for about one hour of moderate or vigorous physical activity every day.

Physical activity for children and young people (5 – 18 Years)

 BUILDS CONFIDENCE & SOCIAL SKILLS	 MAINTAINS HEALTHY WEIGHT
 DEVELOPS CO-ORDINATION	 STRENGTHENS MUSCLES & BONES
 IMPROVES CONCENTRATION & LEARNING	 IMPROVES SLEEP
 IMPROVES HEALTH & FITNESS	 MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD

Be physically active

Spread activity throughout the day

Aim for an average of at least **60** minutes per day across week

All activities should make you breathe faster & feel warmer

 PLAY	 RUN/WALK	 BIKE	 ACTIVE TRAVEL
 SWIM	 SKATE	 SPORT	 PE
 SKIP	 CLIMB	 WORKOUT	 DANCE

Activities to develop movement skills, and muscle and bone strength **ACROSS WEEK**

Get strong  **Move more**

INACTIVITY

Find ways to help all children and young people accumulate an average of at least 60 minutes physical activity per day across the week

UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines, 2019

Being around nature

Being around nature has been linked to both increased levels of physical activity and mental health benefits.⁴⁶ The strongest benefits occur where children have access to green space where they live or where they go to school. Forest school activities have been linked to improved physical skills (motor skills and physical stamina) and increased self-confidence.⁴⁷ A 2020 survey of English children aged 8 to 15 found that 85% agreed that being in nature made them “very happy”.⁴⁸



Involvement with arts and music

There is promising evidence that involvement with arts, dance and music can improve the mental health of children and young people. There is also growing research into the use of arts and music in the treatment of mental health conditions.⁴⁹

Art therapy uses visual arts such as drawing, painting and sculpture to help or prevent emotional difficulties in children and young people. This can be easily used in schools and evidence suggests it can be effective at reducing anxiety, improving emotional and behavioural difficulties⁵⁰ and promoting positive mental, social and emotional development.⁵¹

Dance with groups or peers has been linked to improved wellbeing in young people aged 15-24 years.⁵² Studies also indicate that dance psychotherapy may improve perceptions around body image in young men and women aged 17.⁵³

Music therapy involves combining musical experiences with therapy sessions. This has been shown to improve self-confidence and self-esteem in children and young people with mental health problems⁵⁴ and to improve self-esteem in young people with behavioural and emotional problems.⁵⁵

Going to University or College

Going to University, like all big changes in life, can have a negative impact and cause stress and anxiety, usually only for a short time.⁵⁶ The loss of social support moving away from friends and family can also have a negative effect.⁵⁷ The experience of going to university and college was very different during the covid-19 pandemic and this had a negative impact for many students.⁵⁸ Factors that are linked to increased

wellbeing and lower mental health problems for older students are similar to other age groups – such as building supportive social networks and engaging in hobbies and exercise.⁵⁹ It is also important that Universities and Colleges can facilitate support for students that need additional help with their mental health through links to services.⁶⁰



Things that can have a negative impact

While the factors listed above can promote good mental health in children and young people, there are also many things that can have a negative effect. These include traumatic events in childhood or poor quality homes and neighbourhoods, bullying, caring responsibilities, and how children and young people engage with social media.

Traumatic events in childhood

Traumatic events in childhood (such as parental divorce, parental substance misuse, neglect and abuse, or domestic violence) have been found to increase the risk of poorer mental health from childhood up to midlife.⁶¹ Indeed, exposure to two or more of these traumatic events can create a three times higher risk of depression or anxiety in adulthood.

Fortunately, most children who experience such events appear to stay in good mental health for much of their lives and the factors listed in the previous section – such as supportive family relationships and strong friendships – can support good mental health despite these traumatic events.⁶²

Living in poor quality homes and neighbourhoods

The home environment and neighbourhood children and young people are raised in often influences their mental health.

The risk of multiple mental health problems rises from 1 in 20 to 1 in 4 in young people living in cold housing compared to those who live in warm homes.⁶³

Children living in households with debt are five times more likely to be unhappy than children from wealthier families.⁶⁴ Living in poverty in childhood is also linked to mental health problems later in life. For example, research found that people exposed to persistent poverty in their childhood years had an increased risk of mental health conditions in adulthood.⁶⁵



Bullying

Children and young people who are victims of bullying, or who bully others, are more likely to develop mental health conditions⁶⁶ and have an increased risk of mental health disorders in adulthood.⁶⁷

Certain groups of children and young people are at greater risk of being bullied. This includes girls, pupils from ethnic minority groups, children with disabilities or special educational needs, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (or LGBTQ+) children.⁶⁸

Online bullying (or “Cyberbullying”) is also an emerging problem, affecting as many as 1 in 5 children aged 10 to 15.⁶⁹

In Buckinghamshire, 1 in 10 of the primary school age children who responded to the 2021 OxWell survey reported being bullied at least weekly. For secondary and sixth form age children and young people this was lower at 1 in 14. In the majority of cases (68.6% for primary, 77.8% for secondary and sixth form) the bullying was verbal, followed by physical (24.9% for primary, 21.3% in secondary and sixth form). For cyberbullying there were clear differences based on age, with higher rates for older children (13.8% in primary, 28.3% in secondary and sixth form).

Supporting children and young people to develop empathy and to support others has been shown to reduce bullying.⁷⁰ This includes “active bystander training” which is designed to give children and young people the skills to recognise and challenge inappropriate behaviours.



How children and young people engage with the internet and social media

The internet and social media can be a positive influence. For example, the internet allowed remote teaching and learning during the Covid-19 restrictions. Many children and young people also regularly search online for advice and information, and often say they would like to be able to access digital support for their mental health alongside traditional face to face services.⁷¹

The rise of the internet has, however, led to cyberbullying and the potential for children to be exposed to inappropriate or harmful content.⁷² The amount of time that children spend using screens (including television) also has the potential to displace other activities that protect wellbeing, such as sleep and physical activity.^{73 74}

In the 2021 Buckinghamshire OxWell survey, 1 in 10 primary school aged children reported they had spent more than six hours the previous evening online or playing computer games. A quarter of secondary school pupils said they had posted or done something on the internet they later regretted, with this figure rising to a third in sixth form settings.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health advice to parents is that there is no “safe” cut off for screen use. They recommend that parents focus on building screen use around family activities (and not the other way round)⁷⁵

In the United States, the Surgeon General recommends parents and caregivers teach children and young people about responsible behaviour online and model it themselves.⁷⁶ In England, these skills are covered in the school PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) curriculum and parents are encouraged to reinforce safety messages at home.

Caring responsibilities

Children and young people who have taken on unpaid caring responsibilities for a family member (often referred to as “Young Carers”) are seven times more likely not to be in good health compared to their peers. They are also likely to have poorer mental health. An NHS survey suggested that 20% of young carers aged 16-17 years had a long-term mental health condition, compared with 7% of non-carers of the same age.⁷⁷

According to the 2021 census, 1,085 children aged 5 to 17 and 1,570 young people aged 18 to 24 in Buckinghamshire are unpaid carers.⁷⁸

Many young carers do not recognise their role as a carer. It is important to identify these children and young people so they can be provided with support.

- Live Well -



Live Well - mental health in adults

Promoting good mental health

Good mental health in adults can be promoted by a variety of things, many of which also have a direct impact on our physical health. These include how active we are, what we eat, how much sleep we get, and whether or not we smoke.

As with children and young people, our mental health as adults can be supported by having a social network of friends, by contact with nature and involvement with arts and music.

The job we do also impacts our mental health and research has found that good quality work or volunteering can promote good mental health. Evidence suggests that adults can further enhance their mental health by learning a new skill or adopting the practice of mindfulness (a technique which involves paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and the world around you in the present moment).

Physical activity

Physical activity is important for good mental health and more active lifestyles have been linked to a lower risk of mental health disorders. For example, research found that just 15 minutes of vigorous exercise each day lowered the risk of depression by 26% in adults who were not usually very active.⁷⁹ Another study showed that, for adults aged from their twenties to age 50, every additional physical activity session each week reduced their chance of depression by 6%.⁸⁰

Physical activity has also been shown to improve the symptoms of common mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and distress in the general population, in people with diagnosed mental disorders, and in people living with chronic health conditions.⁸¹

For good mental and physical health, adults should try to be physically active every day.⁸² The more time we spend being physically active, the better the health benefits – but any activity is better than none.



Getting enough sleep

From time to time, everyone has problems getting to sleep, waking in the night or very early in the morning.⁸³ However, getting enough sleep is crucial to protect both our physical and mental wellbeing.⁸⁴

Not getting enough sleep affects our abilities to problem solve, make decisions and our overall mood.⁸⁵ Regular sleep disturbances that last more than a month could be insomnia.⁸⁶ Insomnia is often a symptom of common mental health conditions such as anxiety and can be a risk factor for developing other mental health disorders.⁸⁷

There are actions we can take to promote better sleep, including physical activity, cutting back on caffeine and alcohol, and keeping regular sleeping hours.



Having a good diet

A healthy diet has been associated with a lower risk of depression.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, the relationship between diet and mental health is not simple as some physical health conditions that are linked to a poor diet (such as diabetes and obesity) are associated with worse mental health.⁸⁹ When our mood is low, we are experiencing stress, or are low on sleep, we might also turn to “comfort foods”.⁹⁰ Overall, however, the evidence supports the idea that having a good diet is likely to help our mental health and wellbeing.

Quitting smoking

It is better for both our physical and mental health to never start smoking. Where people do smoke, there is strong evidence that quitting smoking results in reduced anxiety and depression, and better mood and quality of life.⁹¹

Whilst smokers may associate the act of smoking with reduced anxiety and irritability, these positive sensations occur when cravings for nicotine are relieved: the negative feelings are often created by smoking itself.⁹²

More people with mental health conditions smoke, compared to the general population, and can find it harder to stop.⁹³ However, free support is available to quit smoking.

Having a social network

Our mental health as adults can be supported by having a strong social network, known as “social connectedness”.⁹⁴ This includes having a common bond and closeness with others, a shared sense of identity, feeling cared for and accepted.

As well as promoting our mental health, research suggests that social connectedness is important to the recovery of people with mental health difficulties.⁹⁵

Loneliness can be linked to worsening mental health. Mental health conditions can also increase someone’s loneliness by reducing their ability to mix with people and leading them to withdraw.⁹⁶ Loneliness is particularly associated with specific events in our lives such as moving away from a family home, parenting young children, physical health issues, relationship breakdown, and bereavement.⁹⁷

We can reduce loneliness and increase our social network through participation in social activities such as joining group activities or volunteering.

Learning

Learning as an adult has been shown to have a range of benefits linked to better mental health. It can give people a sense of purpose, provide a greater sense of wellbeing, and increase satisfaction with life.⁹⁸

Participation in further education has also been linked to improved wellbeing for adults with moderate to severe mental health conditions.⁹⁹

Being around nature

Being around nature can promote our mental health and reduce levels of depression, anxiety and fatigue. This includes contact with the natural environment through ‘green spaces’ such as parks and woodlands and ‘blue spaces’ in the form of rivers and lakes.

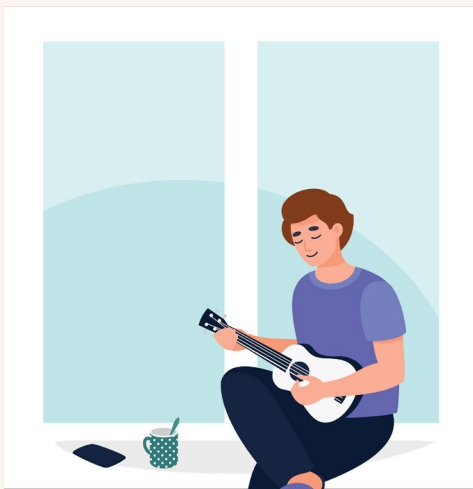
One study found that health and wellbeing were consistently higher for adults who spent 120 minutes or more per week in nature, and this persisted into older age.¹⁰⁰

Access to a good quality natural environment varies greatly depending on where we live. The most economically deprived areas often have less available public green and blue space, meaning people in those communities have fewer opportunities to reap the benefits.¹⁰¹

Involvement with arts and music

Participation in art-based activities – particularly singing, music making and dance – can improve wellbeing and quality of life in adults.

There is also some evidence that art can support the prevention and treatment of mental health conditions (although studies are limited).¹⁰² For example, a review of the research into the role of visual arts on wellbeing outcomes for working age adults (16-64 years) with a diagnosed mental health condition found a consistently positive effect.¹⁰³



Good quality work

Being in employment and having a 'good' job (in which people are treated fairly, are included in decision making, have a secure and consistent income and feel appropriately rewarded for their efforts) supports and protects good mental health.

People who are unemployed are between four and ten times more likely to report depression or anxiety¹⁰⁴. Indeed, in January 2021, 4 in 10 unemployed people in the UK had poor mental health compared to nearly 3 in 10 in employment¹⁰⁵. Support for unemployed people to overcome the negative impacts of losing a job, and to help them re-enter work, can help promote mental health.¹⁰⁶

The relationship between employment and mental health is, however, complex. Mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression are the leading cause of lost working days in the UK.¹⁰⁷ People with mental health disorders can also find it difficult to find and maintain work, often as a result of negative perceptions about mental health from employers.¹⁰⁸

There is mixed evidence regarding the impact of the gig economy on mental health. The flexibility can be positive, helping people with mental health conditions stay in, or return to, work.¹⁰⁹ The gig economy can also impact negatively on people's mental health as there is frequently less financial security, lower decision-making and greater stress and strain.¹¹⁰



Volunteering

Adults who engage in regular volunteering activities experience higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who have never volunteered.¹¹¹ There is evidence that acts of kindness and giving improve mental wellbeing by creating purpose, self-worth and a sense of reward.¹¹²

Volunteering also often offers an opportunity to connect with others, further strengthening the positive benefits.

Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness involves paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and the world around you in the present moment. Research has found that mindfulness can improve and protect mental health¹¹³ and can play a role in reducing anxiety, depression and stress.¹¹⁴

Whilst mindfulness-based interventions can be a clinically effective treatment¹¹⁵, the practice may not work for everybody in every setting.¹¹⁶ For example, a recent trial in schools did not improve mental health as students did not engage with it.¹¹⁷

Many activities that incorporate mindfulness approaches are, however, extremely popular with adults with positive results. For example, yoga combines physical activity with elements of mindfulness and can protect against depression.^{118 119}

Things that can have a negative impact

While the factors listed above can promote good mental health in adults, there are many things that can have a negative effect. These include drinking too much alcohol, gambling and living in poor quality homes or neighbourhoods. Worrying about money and debt can also lead to poorer mental health.

Drinking too much alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol is bad for both our physical and mental health. Indeed, alcohol has been identified as contributing to or causing more than 200 different medical conditions.¹²⁰ Some people drink in order to relieve the symptoms of mental ill-health such as anxiety or depression.¹²¹ However, evidence suggests that regularly drinking too much alcohol – including binge drinking – actually has the opposite effect, causing feelings of depression.

Gambling

Harmful gambling (where people continue to gamble despite harmful consequences or the desire to stop) is linked to poor health, low wellbeing and psychological health issues.¹²² People with a gambling disorder have a higher risk of dying from any cause and are at higher risk of self-harm and suicide.¹²³

Gambling also increases the risk of other experiences that can negatively affect our mental health, including the risk of debt, loss of employment, harm to our relationships and reduced social support.¹²⁴

Gambling is generally more common in less deprived groups and people in employment.¹²⁵ However, harmful gambling is more prevalent in people living in deprived areas and amongst people who are unemployed.¹²⁶

Living in poor homes and neighbourhoods

Stable, good quality housing protects mental health but poor quality, overcrowded and insecure housing can cause or worsen existing mental health disorders.¹²⁷

Adults living in overcrowded housing are more likely to experience psychological distress.¹²⁸ Living in a home that is cold is also linked to poorer mental health. For example, a government scheme to support improvements in home energy efficiency found this improved people's mental health in both the short and medium term.¹²⁹

The neighbourhoods we live in equally influence our health. Neighbourhood deprivation is associated with poorer mental health, suicide and needing longer treatment for mental health problems. Meanwhile, people who feel safe in their community tend to suffer less psychological distress and depression. Research has found that acts of neighbourliness and the existence of community hubs (such as sports clubs and activity groups) can foster feelings of togetherness and offer informal sources of support.¹³⁰

Worrying about money

Worrying about money – due to either debt or low income – often has a negative impact on our mental health.¹³¹ Indeed, surveys have found that recent rises in the cost of living are affecting people’s mental health with over half of adults in England reporting that their mental health has deteriorated.¹³²

In Buckinghamshire, 90% of participants in research undertaken by the charity Buckinghamshire MIND in partnership with Citizen’s Advice Bucks in 2022, reported that worrying about their finances – particularly heating and health – impacted negatively on their mental health. The sample size for this study was, however, small (81 participants).¹³³



Unpaid caring responsibilities

Acting as a carer to a family member or close friend can be positive and rewarding. However, worry for the person being cared for can have a negative effect on the carer’s mental health.¹³⁵ The time needed to care can also mean giving up other activities. As many as 1 in 10 adult carers give up work or reduce their working hours in order to fulfil their role as a carer and many give up hobbies and social activities, leading to greater isolation.¹³⁶

As with children, many adults who deliver unpaid care do not see themselves as carers: it is important to identify people with caring responsibilities in order to ensure they get information and support for their physical and mental wellbeing.

- Age Well -



Age Well

- mental health as we grow older

The things that affect our mental health do not change as we grow older. Being physically active, getting enough sleep, and having a good diet all remain important to protecting our mental health as well as contact with nature, involvement with arts and music, learning and mindfulness.

However, as we reach retirement, the way we spend our days often changes along with our social network. Both these factors can influence our mental health.

Retirement

Any significant change can impact on our wellbeing, even when it is positive or expected.¹³⁷ Retirement is a good example of this with research finding it to be the tenth most stressful event across life.¹³⁸

For some people, continuing in part-time work or retiring at a later age can be beneficial to their mental health.^{139 140 141}

Overall, however, retirement can be positive for many people.¹⁴² The protective effects of retirement on mental health are frequently greater for women and for people whose job involved manual labour. The benefits may also be stronger for individuals who were at greater risk for depression before retirement.¹⁴³

Many people choose to use their retirement to volunteer in their community. As outlined in the previous section, volunteering has a positive impact on life satisfaction and wellbeing. Research also suggests that volunteering can reduce the risk of dementia.¹⁴⁴

Changes to our social network

Having a strong social network of friends or family is important to our mental health whatever age we are. 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 us feeling more isolated.^{145 146}

Social isolation and loneliness increase the risks of depression, anxiety, suicide and dementia for older adults.¹⁴⁷

Fortunately, there are things we can do to protect our mental health as we age. This includes joining groups of people with similar interests, accessing online support, and using devices – such as computers, laptops and smartphones – to maintain social contact with family and friends. Some older adults may, however, find it hard to use this technology.¹⁴⁸



Who is most at risk of poor mental health?



Who is most at risk of poor mental health?

While the factors listed in the previous sections can affect everyone, some people are more likely to experience poorer mental health than others. This includes people who live in more deprived areas and those who belong to particular groups.

This section considers the national research and local Buckinghamshire data in order to identify who is most at risk of poor mental health.

Poverty and deprivation

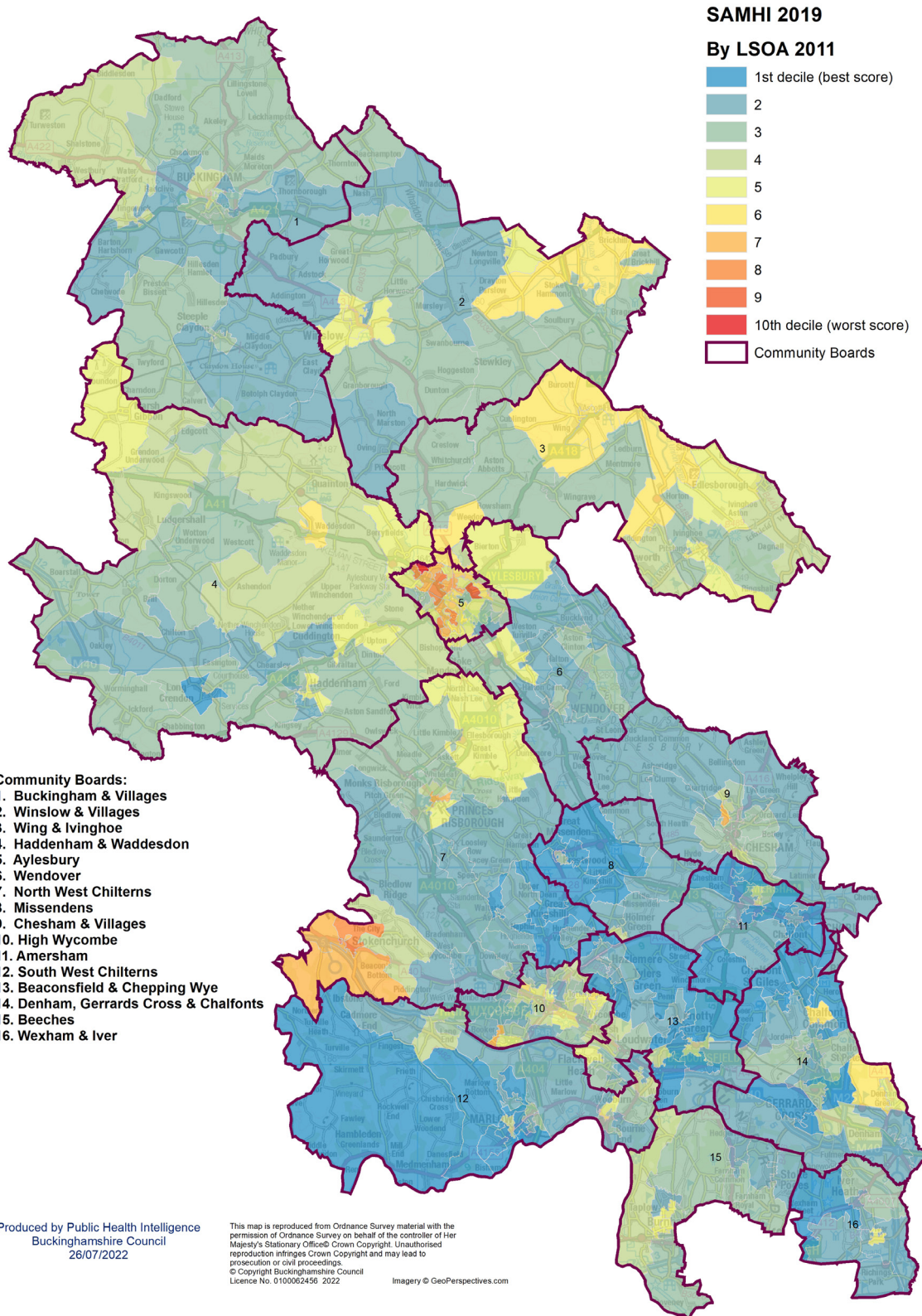
National research has demonstrated a link between poverty and mental health. For example, a large national study showed that children in the poorest fifth of households in the UK were four times more likely to have serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11 than those in the wealthiest fifth.¹⁴⁹

This link between poverty and mental health is evident in Buckinghamshire. Data from before the pandemic found that people living in the most deprived fifth of areas in 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.¹⁵⁰ Emergency admissions for mental health are significantly higher for residents living in the Aylesbury and High Wycombe Community Board areas which

are both areas with higher levels of deprivation. The figure on the next page illustrates this pattern, mapping data on mental health from multiple sources such as mental health related hospital attendances and prescribing of antidepressants ([for more information, see glossary](#)).¹ This creates an index which can be compared against England – the figure is colour coded so that the darkest blue areas have the best mental health (i.e. are in the best tenth of areas nationally) and red areas have worse mental health than the national average. The majority of areas in Buckinghamshire score significantly “better” compared with England. The areas with poorer mental health are primarily clustered in the Aylesbury Community Board area.

¹ NHS mental health related hospital attendances, prescribing of antidepressants, QOF depression data and Incapacity benefit and Employment support allowance for mental health condition from the Department of Work and Pensions.

Buckinghamshire Small Area Mental Health Index (SAMHI) for each Lower Super Output Area and Community Board, 2019



Gender Differences

Mental health risk varies by gender. National data shows that women in England are three times more likely than men to experience common mental health problems, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.¹⁵¹ However, men have a much higher risk of dying by suicide and are three times more likely than women to end their own lives.¹⁵²

Poorer mental health in particular groups

Mental health is also linked to gender identity and sexual orientation. Research shows that people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender have a higher risk of mental health conditions linked to emotional distress, discrimination and barriers to accessing healthcare and support.¹⁵³

The risk of poor mental health is higher in people with physical health problems. About 30% of people in England in 2012 who had a long-term physical health condition also had a mental health problem, primarily depression or anxiety.¹⁵⁴

There is evidence that people from many other groups may have higher risk of poor mental health. This includes people who are neurodiverse ([see glossary for definition](#)),¹⁵⁵ and people from some ethnic groups and from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Migrants may have an increased likelihood of mental health disorders linked to their experiences before, during or after migration.¹⁵⁷

As outlined above, children and adults who act as carers for others are also at risk of having poorer mental health if they do not get the right support. In 2021, around 8% of Buckinghamshire residents aged five and over provided some level of unpaid care.¹⁵⁸



Taking action - & - getting help



Taking action and getting help

The importance of talking about mental health

Mental health conditions are common but many people don't feel comfortable talking about their mental health.

There is often a stigma associated with mental health conditions and people can fear being shunned by their family or society if they admit to struggling with their mental health.¹⁵⁹ Studies have found these attitudes amongst black women¹⁶⁰, refugee and asylum seeker women¹⁶¹, and members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) community¹⁶². Indeed, research found that some members of the GRT community fear admitting to mental health problems in case it leads to children being removed from their families.¹⁶³

Men often feel under pressure to live up to society's expectations of what it means to be a man. This frequently results in a reluctance to talk about mental health. Men tend to wait longer before admitting to mental health problems and are less likely to engage with support. Feelings of embarrassment or shame also mean that men are less likely to take time off work for mental health reasons.¹⁶⁴ These attitudes are reported to be particularly pronounced amongst black men.¹⁶⁵

As a society we need to encourage open conversations about mental health, sharing the message that everyone can be affected and emphasising the importance of promoting our mental health and seeking support.



What can we do to promote our own mental health?

While not all mental health conditions and disorders can be prevented, there are many things we can do to improve and protect our own mental health.

Be active

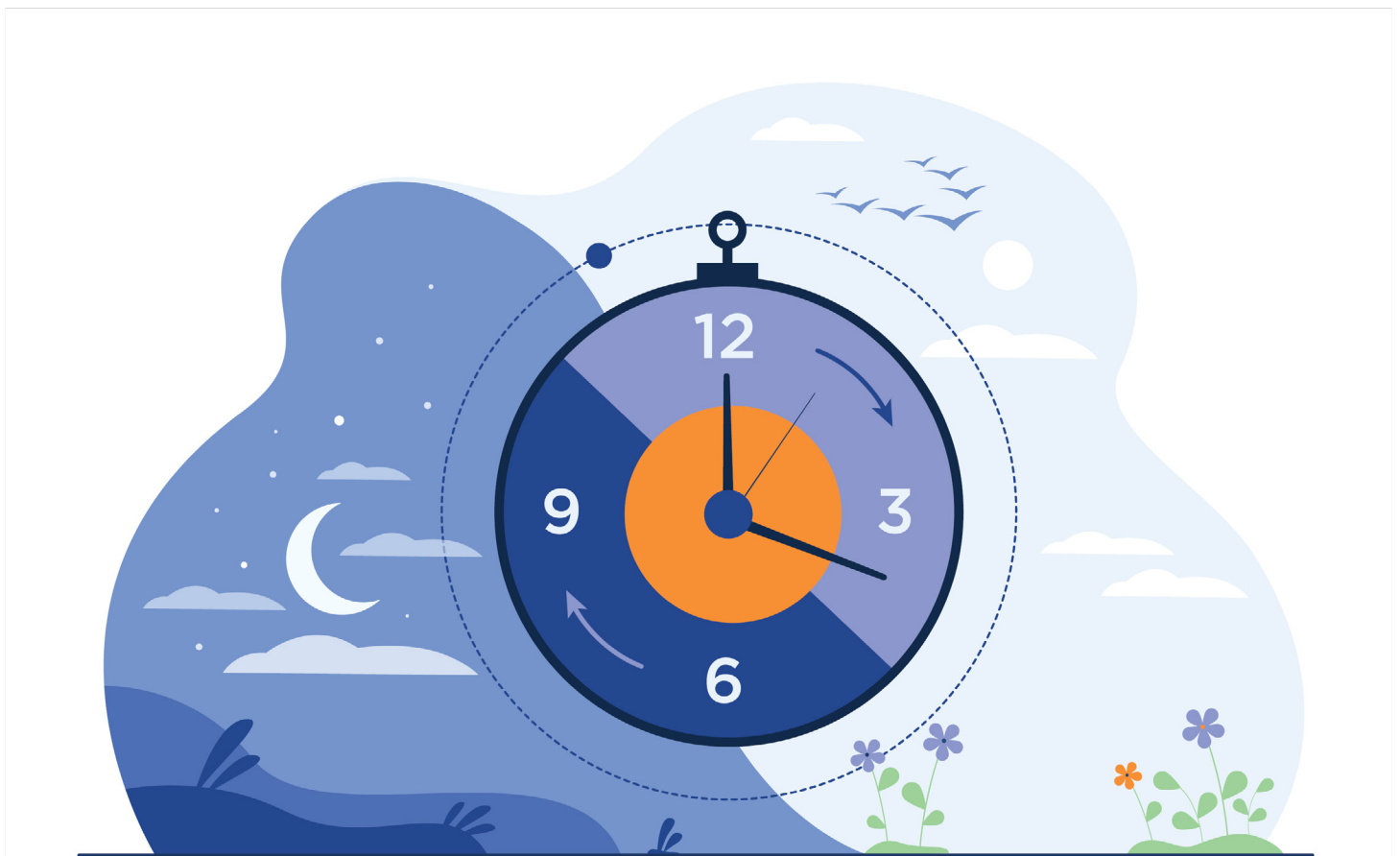
Physical activity has significant benefits to both our mental and physical health. Becoming more active while spending time with others can also help us build social networks, reducing isolation and loneliness. For example, you could join one of 60 walks across Buckinghamshire in our [Simply Walks scheme](#). Trained volunteer leaders will help you walk at your own pace, with no need to worry about being left behind.

Everyone is welcome whether you are fit and active, haven't exercised in a long time, or have been advised to join by a doctor. Or use the new [Love Exploring app](#) to explore your local park or green space through games and trails for families.

Exercising outside can help us **connect with nature** which is another factor that has been shown to promote and protect mental health.

Get enough sleep

There are many things we can do to promote better sleep, including physical activity, cutting back on caffeine and alcohol and keeping regular sleeping hours. For more advice see: [Sleep problems - Every Mind Matters](#).



Eat Well

Having a good diet is likely to help our mental health and wellbeing. This includes eating lots of fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, a moderate amount of poultry, eggs and dairy and occasional red meat.

We should also **limit the amount of alcohol we drink**. Guidance from Chief Medical Officers is included in the box below and more detail is available at: [UK Chief Medical Officers' Low Risk Drinking Guidelines](#).

Support to be a healthier weight or cut down on alcohol is available to everyone who lives in Buckinghamshire via the [Be Healthy Bucks](#) free health and wellbeing service.

The Chief Medical Officers' guidelines for both men and women is that:

- To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis.
- If you regularly drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread your drinking evenly over 3 or more days. If you have one or two heavy drinking episodes a week, you increase your risks of death from long term illness and from accidents and injuries.
- The risk of developing a range of health problems (including cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases the more you drink on a regular basis.
- If you wish to cut down the amount you drink, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week.



Quit smoking

It is better for both our physical and mental health to never start smoking. However, support is available to people who do smoke and want to give up via the [Be Healthy Bucks service](#).

Spend time with family, make new friends and take the time to talk

Having support from family and friends is important to the mental health of both children and adults. Making time for each other, sharing our feelings and offering friendship and support can improve wellbeing and mental health.¹⁶⁶

Parents have a crucial role in promoting the mental health of their children. There are lots of things that parents can do to ensure their children's mental wellbeing, from playing and cuddling babies and young children to daily reading. Advice and support are available to parents via the [Buckinghamshire Family Information Service](#). [Local libraries](#) offer Bounce and Rhyme sessions which are a good opportunity to meet other families with young children, enjoy music together and pick up a book to share at the same time.

Young people and adults can also promote their own mental health by making friends and finding new ways to connect with other people. This could include joining a school or community group or volunteering. Activities that engage with arts and music have been proven to be particularly beneficial to mental health.

Give to others

Acts of kindness and giving have been shown to improve our mental wellbeing. Volunteering can, therefore, boost our mental health while also introducing us to new friends and a wider social network. The [Buckinghamshire Volunteer Matching Service](#) can link people that want to volunteer to roles where they are most needed.

Learn a new skill

Learning a new skill can promote our mental health, giving us purpose and a sense of wellbeing as well as increasing our satisfaction with life. Many community groups offer local opportunities to learn a new skill and some of these are listed on the [Buckinghamshire Adult Learning](#) website.

Consider mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness involves paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and the world around you in the present moment. The practice does not appeal to everyone but some people find activities that incorporate mindfulness very helpful.

Mindfulness exercises can be found on the internet – for example, [Mindful Breathing Exercise](#) – or you might want to try a local group activity such as yoga.

Using the internet and social media safely

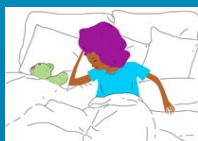
The internet and social media can be both positive and negative. Parents might find it useful to consider the advice from the UK Chief Medical Officers on children and young people's screen and social media use (see below).

UK Chief Medical Officers' advice for parents and carers on Children and Young People's screen and social media use

Technology can be a wonderful thing but too much time sitting down or using mobile devices can get in the way of important, healthy activities. Here are some tips for balancing screen use with healthy living.

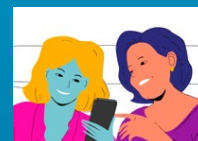
Sleep matters

Getting enough, good quality sleep is very important. Leave phones outside the bedroom when it is bedtime.



Sharing sensibly

Talk about sharing photos and information online and how photos and words are sometimes manipulated. Parents and carers should never assume that children are happy for their photos to be shared. For everyone – when in doubt, don't upload!



Education matters

Make sure you and your children are aware of, and abide by, their school's policy on screen time.



Keep moving!

Everyone should take a break after a couple of hours sitting or lying down using a screen. It's good to get up and move about a bit. #sitlessmovemore



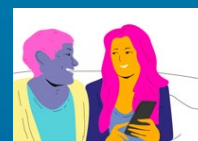
Safety when out and about

Advise children to put their screens away while crossing the road or doing an activity that needs their full attention.



Talking helps

Talk with children about using screens and what they are watching. A change in behaviour can be a sign they are distressed – make sure they know they can always speak to you or another responsible adult if they feel uncomfortable with screen or social media use.



Family time together

Screen-free meal times are a good idea – you can enjoy face-to-face conversation, with adults giving their full attention to children.



Use helpful phone features

Some devices and platforms have special features – try using these features to keep track of how much time you (and with their permission, your children) spend looking at screens or on social media.



While aimed at children and young people, adults might find much of this advice helpful. Older adults, especially people who can't get out and about very much, might also benefit from support to learn how to use technology more effectively as a way to avoid becoming isolated and lonely.

Recognise caring responsibilities and seek support

Many children and adults who deliver unpaid care do not see themselves as carers. Recognising caring responsibilities can help people understand the need to take care of their own physical and mental wellbeing and to seek support.

Information on the support for young carers is available at [I am a young carer](#) and for adults at [Support for carers](#).

How to get help

Despite all these actions, some people in Buckinghamshire will continue to suffer from mental health conditions, ranging from anxiety to severe mental illnesses. It is important to remember that mental health problems can affect anyone and are nothing to be embarrassed about.

If you have concerns about your mental health you should contact your GP. Your GP will be able to direct you to the support that is right for you. This may include a referral to NHS mental health services.

You can also access the 24/7 Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Mental Health Helpline by calling 111, or seek support via one of the [mental health helplines](#) operating in the county.

Finally, it is worth remembering that many people with mental health conditions enjoy a good quality of life and many of the things in this report can support mental health alongside formal treatment.



- Recommendations -



Recommendations

There is a lot that individuals can do to support their own mental health and suggested actions for residents 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 have 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.
- Employers can adopt a range of approaches to support and improve mental health in their workforce. They can sign up to the Champion the Change Employer's Pledge. Advice and information are available for business of all sizes through:
 - [Mental Health at Work website](#)
 - [CBI](#)
 - [NICE guidance](#)
- Consider the needs of the groups most at risk of poorer mental health as identified in this report 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.

- 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.
- Encourage conversations about mental health in everyday settings. Examples could include providing training to hairdressers.



Glossary

Digital Inclusion: includes people being having the skills able to use digital devices, the right infrastructure to connect to the internet and accessible services, including those dependent on assistive technology to access digital services.¹⁶⁷

Mental Health Disorder: WHO use mental health disorder interchangeably with condition - their definition is "A mental disorder is characterised by a clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour."¹⁶⁸ In the context of the national NHS survey quoted, it can refer to a mental health condition in the domains of: emotional, behaviour and hyperactivity disorders.

Neurodiversity: Neurodiversity describes differences in the way people's brains work. There is a wide range of ways that people perceive and respond to the world. For example, autistic people are neurodiverse.

Small Area Index of Mental Health (SAMHI): The Small Area Mental Health Index (SAMH) is a composite annual measure of population mental health for each Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) in England. The SAMHI combines data on mental health from multiple sources into a single index. These sources are NHS mental health related hospital attendances, prescribing of antidepressants, QOF depression data and Incapacity benefit and Employment support allowance for mental illness from the Department of Work and Pensions.

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