

## Improving mental health by improving life in the city

Improving the context in which people live can improve their mental health, as shown by some of the research-based examples below, taken from the Mental Well-being Impact Assessment, 2011.<sup>1</sup> Addressing these issues can help to improve wellbeing, even if cause and effect are interwoven – mental illness is likely to make people more vulnerable to homelessness, and being homeless may be a contributory cause of mental ill-health, for example.

	<i>Research findings:</i>	<i>Possible action:</i>
Environment, development and housing	People living with a high level of street 'incivilities' such as rubbish, noise and graffiti are twice as likely to report anxiety and 1.8 times more likely to report depression.	Maintain/improve environment in residential streets.
	More amenities and fewer 'incivilities' are associated with 32% lower rates of anti-depressant prescriptions after controlling for socio-economic status.	
	Crowding, poorly maintained or damp housing are all associated with a higher risk of depression.	Decent homes for all.
	Homeless people experience 40 – 50% higher levels of mental health problems than the general population.	Mitigate possible increase in numbers of homeless following changes to benefits system.
	Lack of places to stop and chat, lack of recreation facilities and green spaces are associated with a higher risk of depression.  There is some evidence that exposure to green space is protective against mental illness.	Neighbourhood regeneration, access to green spaces.
Community safety	Improved housing has an impact on perceived safety as well as actual crime.  Association between poor mental health and neighbourhood disorder such as vandalism, high perceived threat from crime.	Address concerns about safety as well as neighbourhood crime.
Planning	Residents on busy streets have less than one quarter of local friends compared with those living on similar streets with little traffic. Streets with little traffic have three times the number of 'gathering spots'.	Reduce traffic on residential streets.
	People living in walkable, mixed use	Reduce car-

	neighbourhoods are more likely to know their neighbours, participate politically and trust others than people living in car-oriented suburbs.	dependence and increase pedestrian-friendly streets.
Communities	<p>Social participation is strongly associated with good mental health. Having three or less close relatives or friends predicts future probability of common mental health disorders, even when a history of mental ill-health is adjusted for. Life satisfaction is linked with commitment to family, friends, social and political involvement.</p> <p>Employment generally improves wellbeing, and volunteering or engagement in schemes such as timebanking or social prescribing (such as arts on prescription) have also been shown to improve participation and hence wellbeing.</p> <p>Evaluations from the previous government's NRF/NDC areas demonstrated benefits to health and wellbeing of individual residents mostly around social capital, quality of life, mental wellbeing and improved feelings about health services and of their 'neighbourhood' increasing with levels of engagement.</p> <p>A good diet protects against depression and high consumption of processed foods is associated with a higher risk of depression.</p>	<p>Continue to strengthen neighbourhood and community networks and to provide opportunities for social engagement, volunteering and cultural participation.</p> <p>Maximise opportunities for those most at risk to buy/access affordable healthy food.</p>
Education	<p>Low educational attainment is a lifelong risk for common mental health problems, with a 50% reduction in risk of depression for those with the highest qualifications; the effect is particularly strong for women.</p> <p>Better daily and long-term academic performance in children who eat breakfast.</p> <p>Lifelong (adult) learning enhances self-esteem and social interaction.</p>	<p>Support breakfast provision at schools.</p> <p>Support opportunities for lifelong learning especially for those with risk factors for mental ill health.</p>
Arts & Leisure	<p>Participation in arts improves wellbeing, health and can support recovery from mental ill-health.</p> <p>Regular physical activity is associated with</p>	<p>Enable participation in arts, leisure and physical activities by those most at risk of poor emotional health.</p>

	lower rates of depression and anxiety across all age groups and also enhances emotional well-being.	
Financial inclusion	<p>While cause and effect may be entangled, people in lowest income quintile have a threefold risk of mental illness; debt is associated with a threefold risk of common mental illnesses and a fourfold risk of psychosis.</p> <p>Improving financial capability reduces the risk of anxiety and depression by 15%.</p>	Continue to address financial inclusion and financial management skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Cooke A, et al. Mental Well-being Impact Assessment: A toolkit for well-being. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: National MWIA Collaborative; 2011.

