

Written evidence from the Mental Health Foundation DES0036

About the Mental Health Foundation

Since 1949, the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) has been the UK's leading charity for everyone's mental health. With prevention at the heart of what it does, MHF aims to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive.

Questions – Opportunities and Challenges

- **What is behind the UK's decline in physical and mental health, and how does it vary region to region? What opportunities and challenges might further devolving employment support provide for addressing this?**

Decline in physical and mental health

We have made huge progress in improving physical health in this century and last. However, mental health is going in the wrong direction, with levels of poor mental health enormous and rising. There are an estimated 1.2 million people on NHS waiting lists in England,¹ and 1 in 4 people experience a diagnosable mental illness in a given year.² The rise in mental health problems among young people is particularly concerning: In 2017, the proportion of young people (17- to 19-year-olds) with a probable mental disorder was estimated at 10%, but by 2022, following the pandemic, this rose to 26%.³ We need to tackle mental health problems not only because of the distress they cause, but as part of making sure we have a good society and a strong economy; mental health problems have an economic and social cost of at least £118bn.⁴

The evidence is clear that it is the places and circumstances in which people are born, grow, study, live and work that have a powerful influence on their mental health.⁵ We also know that those living with financial stress are at increased risk of mental health problems and lower mental wellbeing. Employment is one of the most strongly evidenced determinants of mental health.⁶ Lack of access to either employment or good quality employment can decrease quality of life, social status, self-esteem and achievement of life goals.⁷

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living

The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis are two major factors in the recent decline in population mental health. During the pandemic we undertook regular, repeated surveys of more than 4000 adults who are representative of people aged 18+ and living in the UK. This study outlined that the burden of mental distress was borne disproportionately by those with less economic security and that unless action was taken to

¹ Report of the Public Accounts Committee, available here: publications.parliament.uk

² NHS figure: www.england.nhs.uk

³ In 2017, the proportion of young people with a probable mental disorder was estimated at 12% for 7- to 16-year-olds and 10% for 17- to 19-year-olds, but by 2022, following the COVID-19 pandemic, this rose to 18% and 26% respectively. See here for more information: digital.nhs.uk

⁴ Mental Health Foundation: The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK. (n.d.). www.mentalhealth.org.uk

⁵ Marmot (2010) Fair Society, Health Lives www.instituteofhealthequity.org

⁶ Waddell G, Burton AK. Is work good for your health and wellbeing? London: The Stationery Office; 2006 p30–31.

⁷ McDaid D, Park A-L. Investing in Wellbeing in the Workplace. In: Wellbeing. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2014. p. 1–23.

protect vulnerable people's economic security mental health inequalities were likely to be exacerbated.⁸ This builds on a 2017 survey we commissioned with participants from across the UK that found that 73% of people living in the lowest household income bracket reported having experienced a mental health problem during their lifetime, compared to 59% in the highest household income bracket.⁹

Moreover, in our 2023 paper on *Mental Health and the Cost of Living* we argue that many social and economic groups (younger workers, low wage earners, lone parents, people with pre-existing mental health problems, and people from Black and minority ethnic communities, as well as asylum seekers and refugees) who were at higher risk during the COVID-19 pandemic were also more vulnerable to the negative effects of the cost-of-living crisis.¹⁰ Furthermore, we conclude that people who have experienced stress because of existing poverty and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic were more vulnerable to the cost-of-living crisis and are at higher risk of mental health problems, with research outlining that people with pre-existing mental health problems were 3.5 times more likely to have been in financial difficulty before the crisis hit.¹¹ Research from the Bevan Foundation also outlined that over half of people in Wales reported that their mental health was affected by their financial position during Winter 2023.¹²

While both of these events were undoubtedly challenging, the mental health effects that we have seen were not inevitable. In both our research on [The Covid-19 pandemic](#) and our report on the [cost-of-living](#) we set out some recommendations and proposals which could have prevented the most damaging impacts of both of these factors.

Opportunities and Challenges

Protecting people's mental health requires change at different levels of our society. Central government has a role in ensuring that the structure of our society is conducive to good mental health. This is a job for all government departments, and includes making sure that: good labour conditions are available; people's incomes and housing are adequate, and; people are protected from discrimination.¹³

Good quality work can have a positive impact on an individual's mental health. Devolving employment support could help to move people into work, but any devolved support must take into account an individual's personal support and not add to the stress and anxiety that many people face. We know that trauma can impact a person's ability to work. Any support must be trauma-informed and show an understanding of the traumas individuals have been experiencing, and respond to their needs without creating new trauma. In practice this means that services are equipped to listen to and value people's stories, show an understanding of the traumas they have experienced, and respond to their needs without creating new traumas.

- **What are the main opportunities and challenges associated with further devolution of employment support?**

One of the most significant factors in the effectiveness of employment support for people with a mental health problem is ensuring that it is joined up with other services, especially

⁸ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHF-COVID-financial-inequality-mental-health-report-2020.pdf>

⁹ Mental Health Foundation. *Surviving or Thriving*. London; 2017.

¹⁰ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/MHF-cost-of-living-crisis-report-2023-01-12.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/MHF-cost-of-living-crisis-report-2023-01-12.pdf>

¹² <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Snapshot-of-poverty-in-winter-2023.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/policy-and-advocacy/general-election-2024-our-policy-calls>

mental health services. Any employment support policies should be holistic and joined up with other policy areas such as health and skills, with all working towards the same goals.

With mental health services devolved in the UK, employment support could also play a more effective role in supporting people's mental health if it were also devolved, through delivering better coordination between employment and mental health services, providing the opportunity for a different ethos to be developed.

Many people with a mental health difficulty want to work, but are not offered the right support to be able to do so. Individual Placement and Support is an example of an evidence-based model of supported employment which helps people with mental health difficulties into work and provides continued in-work support. It has been shown to consistently overperform other forms of support for people with severe and enduring mental health problems.¹⁴

- **What might be some of the unintended consequences of devolving employment support?**

The Mental Health Foundation does not have evidence on this issue.

- **What impact could greater devolution of employment support have on the consistency and quality of scheme delivery? How could consistency be maintained across a more devolved system?**

The Mental Health Foundation does not have evidence on this issue.

- **How might devolving employment support impact the relationship between jobseekers and DWP?**

We would direct you to our answer about the unintended consequences of devolving employment support and the need for close collaboration between employment support and social security services.

Questions – Structure

If employment support were to be further devolved:

- **Upon what basis should funding be allocated and why?**

There are certain groups who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing financial distress. These groups include people who are unemployed, people with mental health problems, lone parents, young people, people with disabilities and, people who are Black or from specific minority ethnic communities, as well as asylum-seekers and refugees. Support should be focused on the groups and areas where need is greatest, whilst also meeting the needs of the broader population; that is, taking what has been described by Michael Marmot as a 'proportionately universal' approach.¹⁵

Devolution of employment support would present an opportunity to refocus the system on needs of the people most at risk. Our own work has recently focused on the needs of refugees and asylum seekers: the issues that can impact them specifically are set out in section 3 of our recent report [The Mental Health of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK](#).

- **How should the boundaries of devolved areas be delineated?**

¹⁴ <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/briefing-59-individual-placement-and-support/>

¹⁵ <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report.pdf>

Please see our answer to the previous question.

- **How would a more devolved system function in rural areas?**

The Mental Health Foundation does not have evidence on this issue.

- **What role should DWP play under a more devolved system? For example, in terms of setting objectives, providing oversight, sharing data and establishing a framework for local areas?**

DWP should provide clear guidance to all devolved systems and provide instructions on best practice. Devolved systems must be held to account for improving the wellbeing of their populations (and particularly the most at-risk groups within their populations). For these reforms to work effectively it is important that DWP can report on the system as a whole, but not hold back local areas from other innovative approaches..

- **What balance should be struck between national employment support schemes and locally delivered schemes?**

Please see our answer to the previous question.

Questions – Jobs and Providers

- **What impact might devolving employment support have on the success and quality of job matching? How might it affect jobseekers with additional needs, such as people with health conditions, disabilities, and hard to reach groups?**

Good quality work can have a positive impact on an individual's mental health. Research has shown that improving people's sense of control, increasing skills, and increasing self-esteem may help reduce the impact of financial stress on people's mental health and wellbeing.¹⁶

Devolving employment support could help to create a more tailored approach to moving people into work which would be a positive development. However, any devolved support must take into account an individual's personal support and not add to the stress and anxiety that many people face.

We would also direct the committee to our answer to the first question which provides some context on the characteristics of this employment support.

- **What impact would devolving employment support have on employers and providers?**

Please see our answer to the previous question.

Questions – Lessons Learned

- **What lessons can be learned from employment schemes already devolved to local government?**

The Mental Health Foundation does not have evidence on this issue.

- **Are there any international comparators the Committee should consider in our inquiry?**

¹⁶ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/MHF-cost-of-living-crisis-report-2023-01-12.pdf>

The Mental Health Foundation does not have evidence on this issue.

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