

Stoke-on-Trent DPH Annual Report 2024





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Hello and welcome to this year's Stoke-on-Trent Director of Public Health Annual Report.

In recent years, the conversation around mental wellbeing has rightfully gained prominence, highlighting an essential aspect of our overall health. As the Director of Public Health, I am dedicated to improving and enriching the lives of everyone living in Stoke-on-Trent.

Mental wellbeing is more than just the absence of mental illness; it involves a state of balance, resilience, and the ability to navigate life's challenges. In today's fast-paced world, where stress and anxiety are common, understanding and prioritising mental wellbeing is more important than ever.

In my report last year, we focused on how residents in Stoke-on-Trent can achieve their full potential by reducing inequalities (see progress to date in Appendix 1). Inequalities are avoidable differences in important outcomes like education and health, which impact individuals' future potential and, in the longer term, affect the local population as a whole.

Mental wellbeing emerged as a key theme in the 2023 annual report, and it continues to be a priority in this year's 2024 report. This report reflects the concerted efforts of those committed to enhancing the lives of Stoke-on-Trent residents. It provides insights into recognising signs of mental distress, strategies for maintaining mental health, and resources for seeking help. Whether you are a professional, a caregiver, or someone seeking to improve your own mental wellbeing, this report aims to offer valuable guidance and support.

At the council, we are steadfast in our commitment to fostering a culture where mental wellbeing is valued as much as physical health. By collaborating with our partners and the public, we aim to empower residents to take proactive steps on their mental health journeys, leading to healthier, more fulfilling lives.

This report aims to evaluate our current initiatives, identify existing gaps, and outline our future plans for mental wellbeing in Stoke-on-Trent. By assessing our current efforts, identifying gaps, and setting clear goals for the future, we strive to build a supportive environment where mental wellbeing is prioritised, and every individual is supported in achieving their fullest potential.

Let us all work together to create a community where mental wellbeing is at the forefront, ensuring that every person living in Stoke-on-Trent has the opportunity to thrive.



Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a long horizontal line with a stylized, looped flourish above it.

Stephen Gunther

Introduction from Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is recognised as a vital component of overall wellbeing, this report aims to shed light on the various dimensions of mental wellbeing, offering insights into current challenges, ongoing initiatives, and future directions.

Mental wellbeing affects every aspect of our lives, from personal relationships and workplace productivity to societal stability and economic progress. Despite its critical importance, mental wellbeing has often been overlooked and stigmatised. This report strives to dismantle those barriers by fostering understanding, compassion, and action.

Within these pages, you will find a detailed analysis of the state of mental wellbeing in our communities, drawing on the latest research, statistics, and expert opinions. Furthermore, this report highlights the voices of those who have lived with mental health challenges, providing a human face to the data and reminding us of the personal stories behind the statistics.

We are at a pivotal moment where increased awareness and advocacy can lead to meaningful change. This report serves not only as a resource, it acts as a call to action for residents, communities, organisations and society at large. It is imperative that we work together to create environments that support mental wellbeing, reduce stigma, and ensure access to quality care for all.

As you read through this report, we hope it inspires a deeper understanding of mental wellbeing issues and motivates collective efforts to improve mental wellbeing outcomes. Let this be a step towards a future where mental wellbeing is prioritised, supported, and integrated into every facet of our lives.

Thank you for your commitment to this cause.



Kind regards,



Councillor Lynn Watkins
Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing

Understanding Mental Health and Mental Wellbeing

What is mental health?

Mental health is a broad concept that encompasses mental wellbeing and the absence of mental illness. It can be difficult to define, as mental health issues and their impacts are unique to each individual. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)¹, mental health is "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".

Good mental health allows individuals to function effectively in daily life, manage stress, maintain relationships, and make sound decisions. Conversely, mental ill health is characterised by ongoing challenges in mood, thinking, and behaviour, where coping with daily life becomes consistently difficult.

What is Mental Wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing refers to a positive state of thriving in various areas of life, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social aspects.

- **Emotional Health:** Experiencing positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, and resilience.
- **Psychological Health:** Having a sense of purpose, self-acceptance, and the ability to manage stress.
- **Social Health:** Building and maintaining fulfilling relationships and having a sense of belonging and support within a community.

In Stoke-on-Trent, we aim to promote mental wellbeing to enhance the mental health of our community, thereby improving societal wellbeing.

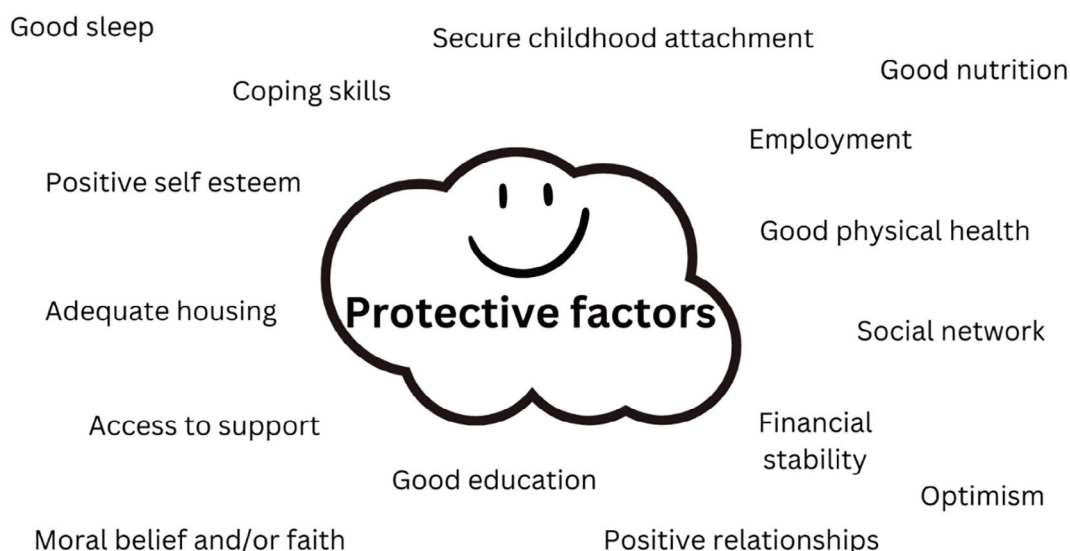
What Shapes Our Mental Wellbeing?

Several factors influence our mental wellbeing, ranging from our external environment to our internal life circumstances. By understanding and addressing these factors individually and institutionally, we can help each other to improve the wellbeing of everyone in Stoke-on-Trent.

- **Education and Skills:** Education boosts confidence and problem-solving abilities, increasing the likelihood of securing a good job, which supports positive mental wellbeing.
- **Money:** Financial stability enhances choice and quality of life, reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing.
- **Healthy Behaviours and Leisure:** Physical health is closely linked to mental health. A balanced diet, regular physical activity, and leisure time can significantly improve mood and wellbeing.
- **Work and Volunteering:** Employment and volunteering provide purpose, skill development, and social connections, supporting positive mental wellbeing. Poor working conditions can negatively impact mental health.
- **Environment:** Access to quality green spaces, clean streets, and a safe environment improves mental wellbeing by providing opportunities for relaxation, exercise, and social interactions.
- **Housing:** Overcrowded, noisy, or unsafe housing negatively impacts mental wellbeing. Conversely, stable and safe housing supports good mental health.
- **Being Connected:** Social connections with friends, family, and community enhance happiness and security. Transport facilitates these connections, broadening opportunities and access to support.

These factors can affect mental wellbeing in a positive or negative way and have been divided into protective factors (figure 1) and risk factors (figure 2) - (figures on next page)

protective factors (figure 1)



protective factors (figure 2)



Why mental wellbeing?

Improving mental wellbeing, and preventing mental illness and suicide, are key public health priorities. This requires cross-sectoral action, including early years, education, health and social care, business, welfare, housing, criminal justice, and community sectors. Mental wellbeing is influenced throughout the life course by individual, family, community, and societal factors.

In the UK, mental ill health is the largest cause of disability, contributing 22.8% of the total disability burden, compared to cancer (15.9%) and cardiovascular disease (16.2%). Stoke-on-Trent City Council envisions a city where all individuals can reach their potential, feel safe and independent, and achieve better health and wealth through the promotion of mental wellbeing, prevention of mental illness, early intervention, and support for recovery.

What is Stoke-on-Trent's Ambition and Where are We Now?

Stoke-on-Trent's Mental Wellbeing Ambition

Our corporate strategy² focuses on the collaborative efforts between people, communities, and institutions to improve the overall wellbeing of Stoke-on-Trent residents.

To achieve this, we aim to work collaboratively with partners and stakeholders on the following themes which will contribute to an overall improvement in mental health and wellbeing.

The 7 themes of focus are:



1. Healthier (creating a healthier standard of living for all our citizens)
2. Wealthier (reducing hardship and enabling greater shared prosperity)
3. Safer (building empowered communities, safe from the threat of harm)
4. Greener (conserving our environment and living more sustainably)
5. Cleaner (working together to clean up our city and our communities)
6. Fairer (tackling inequality and improving life chances for everyone)
7. Skilled (providing opportunities for people to improve their skills and education)

These themes are integral to understanding and addressing the mental wellbeing of our residents. The following section looks at mental wellbeing in Stoke-on-Trent.

What do we know about Mental Wellbeing in Stoke-on-Trent?

The Thriving Places Index

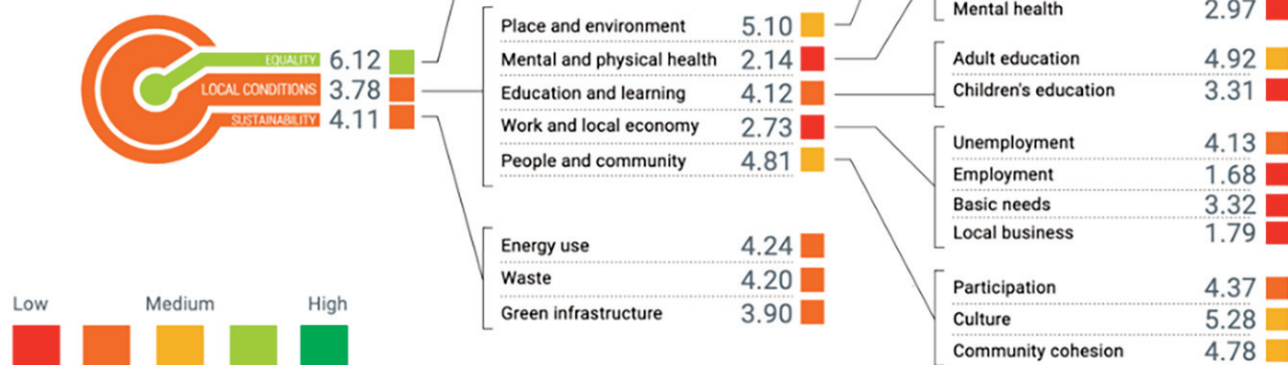
This index identifies the local conditions required for good mental wellbeing and measures whether those conditions are being delivered fairly and sustainably. It compares scores on the following major domains:

- Local conditions: explores if the local authorities are creating the right conditions of wellbeing.
- Equality: Explores whether wellbeing is delivered fairly across the local area.
- Sustainability explores whether wellbeing is delivered sustainably.

The Thriving Places Index (TPI) for Stoke-on-Trent can be seen in figure 3

protective factors (figure 1)

Stoke-on-Trent



The TPI indicates that the majority of the factors affecting wellbeing in terms of local conditions provided by the local authority need significant improvement. However, the limited conditions and resources pertaining to wellbeing are distributed more equally in Stoke-on-Trent compared to other local authorities in England.

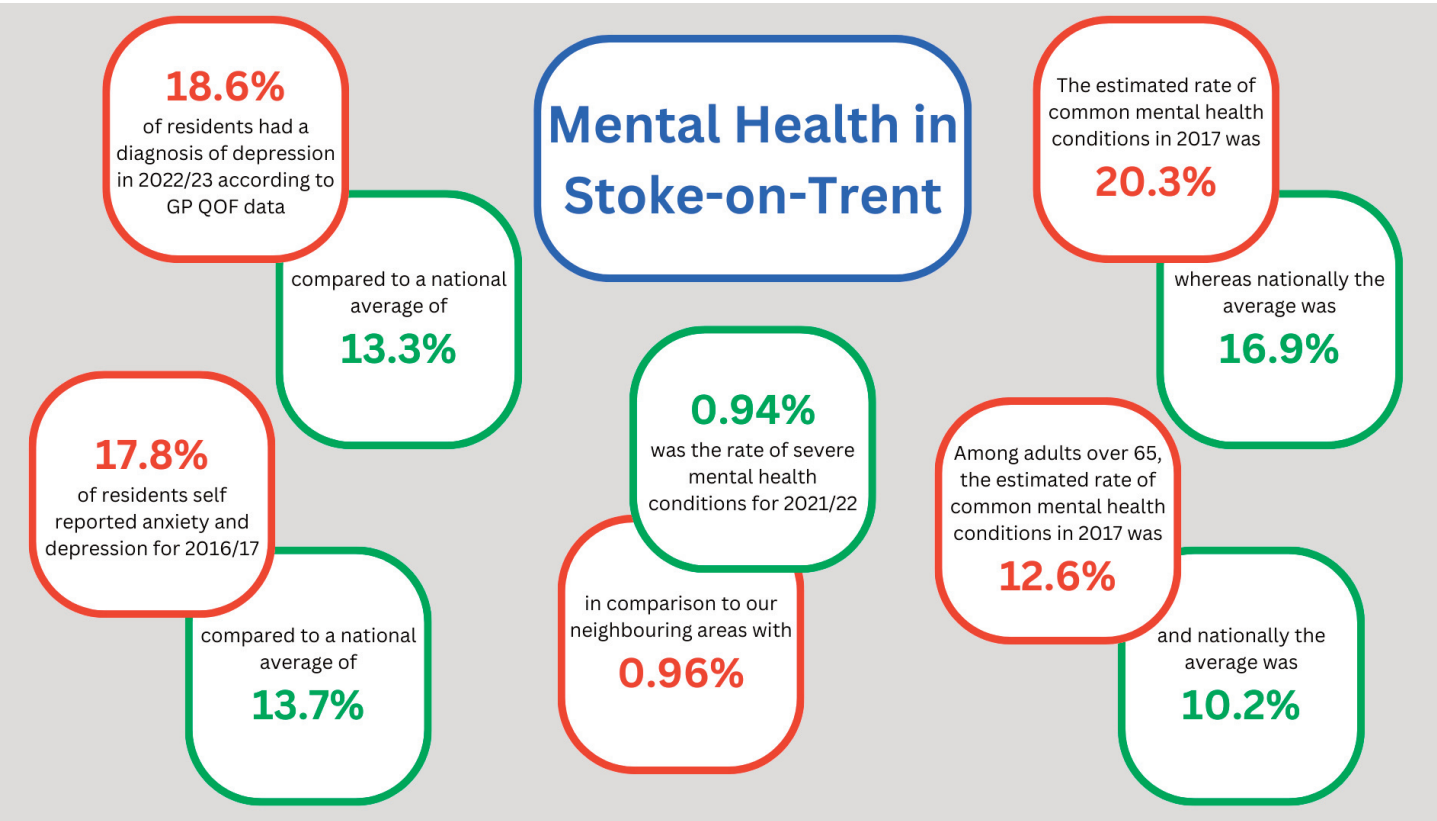
Stoke-on-Trent Residents Life Satisfaction

- In 2022-2023, on average, people in Stoke-on-Trent reported “high” levels of life satisfaction, feeling life is worthwhile and happiness, with “low” levels of anxiety. However, there is a marked increase in anxiety levels for Stoke-on-Trent and the country at large post the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In comparison to nation levels, Stoke-on-Trent levels remain reduced. Table 1 compares the Life Satisfaction levels for Stoke-on-Trent versus national levels.

Table 1: Life Satisfaction in Stoke-on-Trent in 2022/234.

Satisfaction domain	Period of survey	Scale	Stoke-on-Trent	England
Life satisfaction	04/2022 - 03/2023	Mean (Where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied')	7.2	7.4
Feeling life is worthwhile	04/2022 - 03/2023	Mean (Where 0 is 'not at all worthwhile' and 10 is 'completely worthwhile')	7.6	7.7
Happiness	04/2022 - 03/2023	Mean (Where 0 is 'not at all happy' and 10 is 'completely happy')	7.3	7.4
Anxiety	04/2022 - 03/2023	Mean (Where 0 is 'not at all anxious' and 10 is 'completely anxious')	3.4	3.2

Figure 4: Mental Health in Stoke-on-Trent.



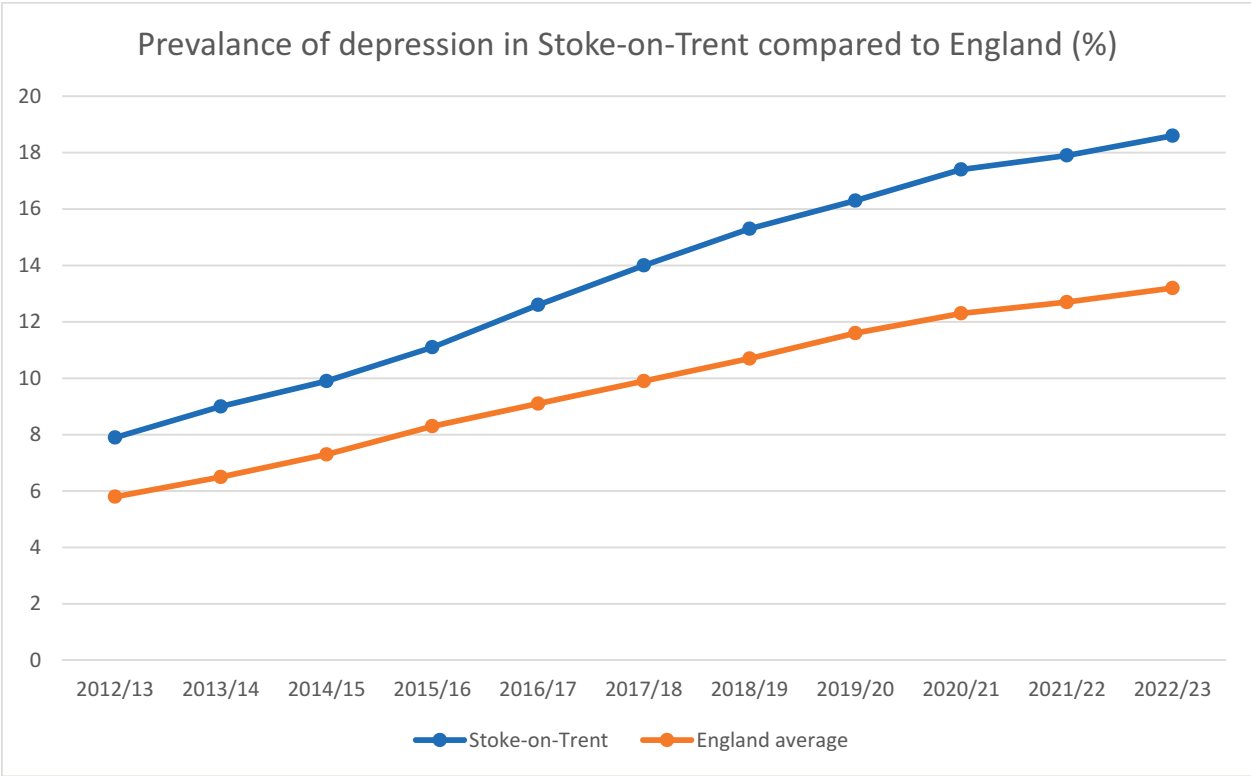
The occurrence of common mental health conditions, like depression and anxiety, among Stoke-on-Trent residents appears to be 17.8% to 20.3%, compared to a national average of 13.3% to 16.9% (as shown in figure 4).

This means that on average these conditions are about 4.3% more common in our area; this significant difference reflects the worse mental wellbeing our residents experience.

Data from the GP Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) in figure 5 shows a continuing steady increase in the proportion of our residents suffering from depression over the past 10 years.

In the last 10 years, it has been increasing at a much faster rate than the national average leading to much larger difference between our numbers.

Figure 5: Prevalence of depression in Stoke-on-Trent compared to England between 2012/13 and 2022/23.



The number of suicides in the area are also higher than the England average and have been increasing over the past few years. Between 2020 and 2022, there were 16 suicides per 100,000 residents compared 10.3 per 100,000 people in England⁵.

Education and Skills

Education in children and young people has been shown to decrease occurrence of common mental health disorders and encourages early engagement with health services. Higher educational attainment improves opportunities for employment and income which in turn affects wellbeing and mental health⁶. 25.9% of the population of Stoke-on-Trent have no educational qualifications, with a further 11% leaving school with Level 1 and entry level qualifications. This includes 1 to 4 GCSEs grade A* to C, any GCSEs at other grades, O levels or CSEs (any grades), 1 AS level, NVQ level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic or Essential Skills. 56% of the children in state-funded schools meet the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths at the end of Key Stage 2, compared to 60% in England.

Healthy Behaviours and Leisure

Poor physical health often causes lower levels of mental wellbeing and increases the risk of developing mental health conditions⁷. Having poor physical health can affect other aspects of life like employment, daily activities, financial stability, social isolation due to time spent in hospital and stress. All these aspects are key to maintaining good mental health and wellbeing. The city currently faces the following challenges with regards to health²:

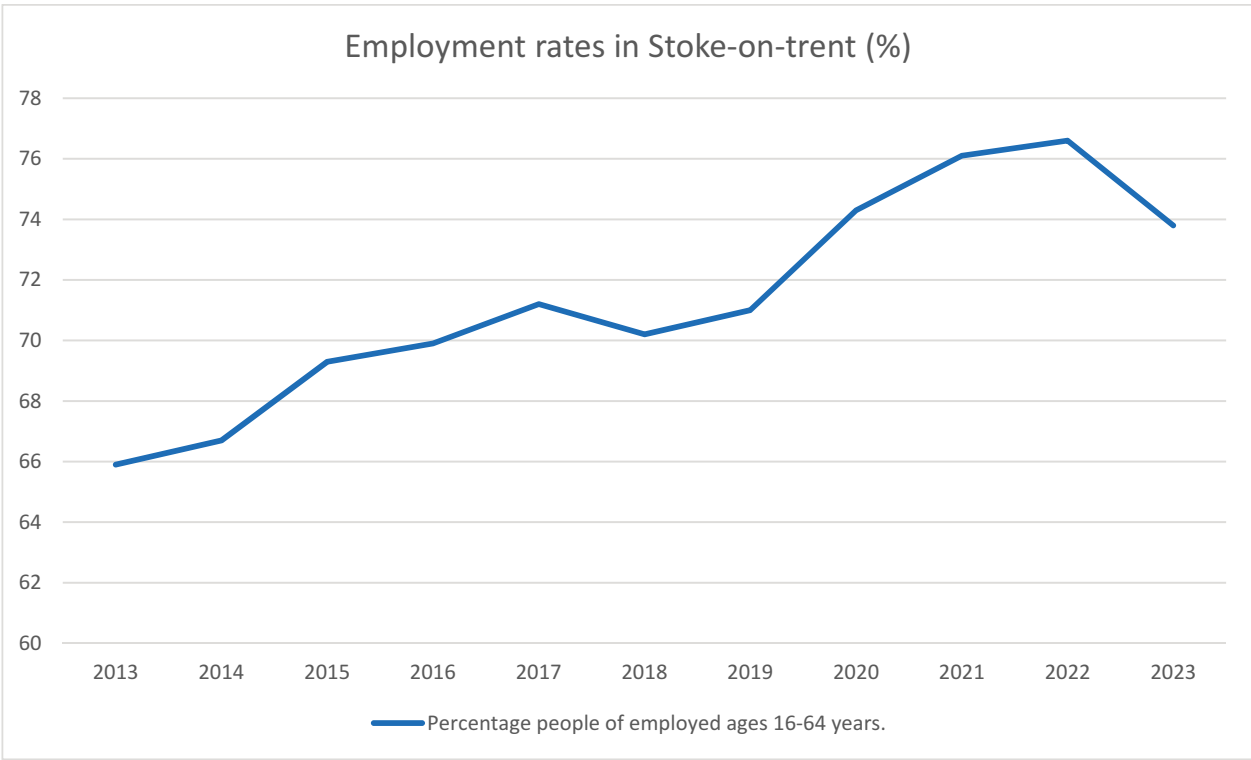
- Higher prevalence of obesity: 67.1% of over-18s in Stoke-on-Trent are classified as overweight or obese as opposed to 63.8% national average.
- Higher premature mortality (preventable deaths per 100,000): 215.1 in Stoke-on-Trent and national average of 142.2.
- Economically inactive adults due to long term sickness: 39.6% compared to national average of 25.4%.

Work and Money

Mental wellbeing and money are strongly connected, and debt can trigger or worsen stress, anxiety and depression. Unemployment and redundancy are the most common reasons for people falling into debt.

The rate of employment in Stoke-on-Trent has dropped from 76.6% in 2022 to 73.8% in 2023. The proportion of people in Stoke-on-Trent who are involuntarily excluded from the labour market, due to unemployment, sickness or disability and caring responsibilities, is 21.9%. Figure 6 shows the trend in employment in Stoke-on-Trent over the past 10 years. In March 2024, 6.1% of working age Stoke-on-Trent residents were claiming unemployment related benefits, rising from 5.5% the previous year⁸.

Figure 6: Employment rates in Stoke-on-Trent between 2013 and 2023⁸.



Poor mental health sometimes makes managing finances harder and constant worrying about money makes mental health worse, causing a self-sustaining cycle of debt and mental ill health⁹.

One in two adults with debts have a mental health problem, one in four people with mental health problems are in debt¹⁰. Debt could come from things like loss of employment or divorce, mental or physical illness requiring time off work, low income and spending during manic episodes of mental illness.

Stoke-on-Trent was listed as the 9th highest local authority with individual insolvency in the country with a rate of 41.1 per 10,000 adults. This is an increase from the 2021 rate of 39.1. Local rates of insolvencies are two-thirds higher than the national average of 25.0¹¹.

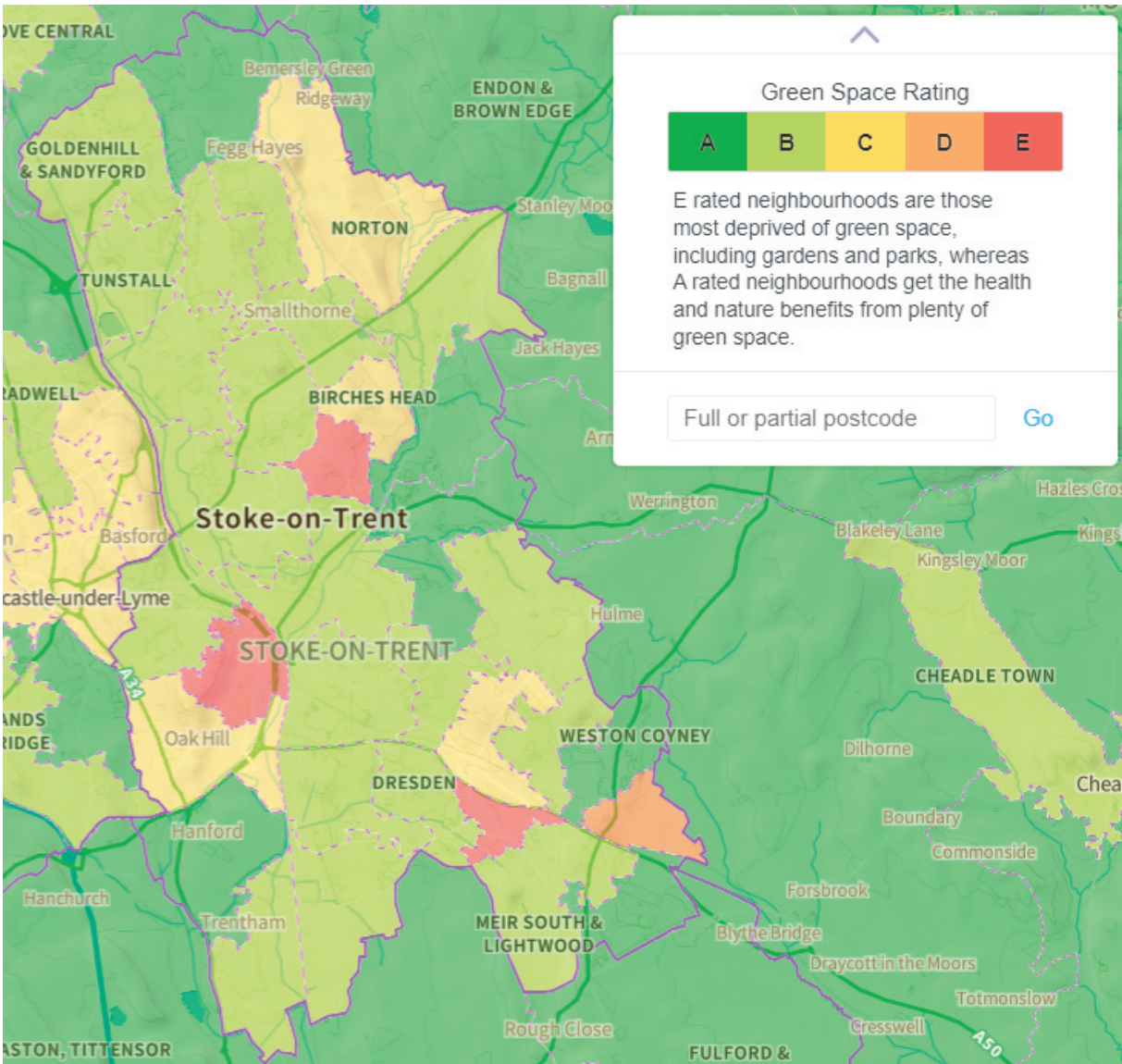
With the increased cost of living in recent years, these figures have worsened and with that the associated stresses contributing to a decline in mental wellbeing. However, there is potential for this to improve over the coming months and years, due to falling inflation and an economy that is showing slight signs of improvement.

Green space

Access to green spaces in urban areas has shown to have a relaxing effect, reducing stress and anxiety, and increasing mental wellbeing across all age groups¹².

Although quite densely populated, Stoke-on-Trent has been found to have adequate access to green spaces across most of the city, except for a small number of wards including Meir North, Boothon, Lightwood North and Normacot, Birches Head and Northwood. As seen in figure 7, these wards are rated as being deprived or very deprived of access. In comparison, the surrounding areas outside Stoke-on-Trent have better access with no areas shown to be deprived or very deprived¹³.

Figure 7: Green Space Rating map for Stoke-on-Trent¹³. The copyright to this image is owned by Friends of the Earth Limited.



Housing

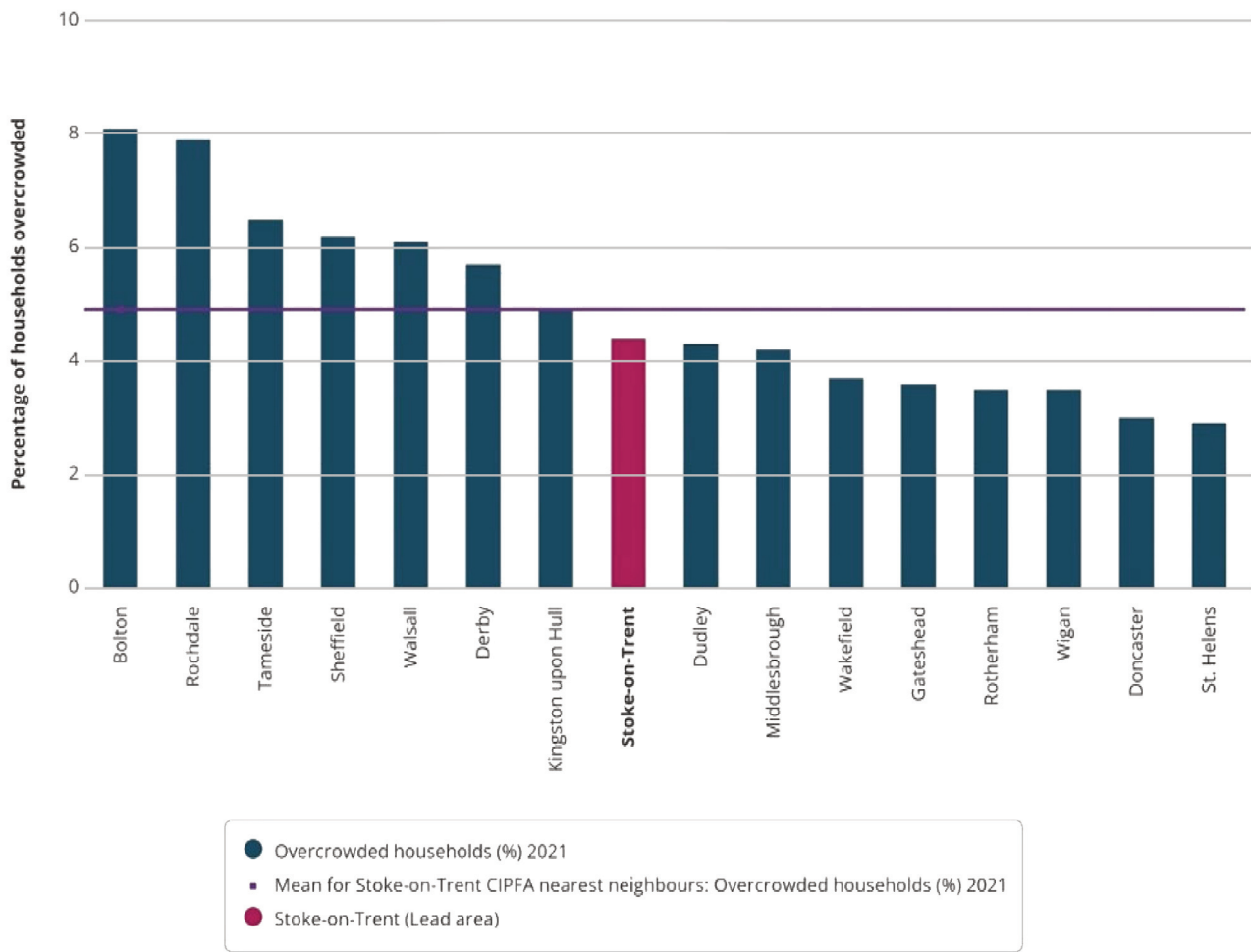
In the past few decades, there has been extensive research on the effects of housing on mental wellbeing with regards to availability as well as the quality of housing.

Housing with poor heating, mould and overcrowding has been linked to poor mental wellbeing and even mental health conditions like depression and anxiety¹⁴. However, this link between housing and mental wellbeing could be attributed to financial wellbeing. With the rising cost of living and cost of housing, this drop in mental wellbeing could be anticipated to drop even further.

In Stoke-on-Trent, between 15% and 20% of council tenants reported damp or mould in their properties; this has been shown to have adverse mental and physical health effects. Damp and mould are often due to fuel poverty and lack of proper heating¹⁵. In 2021, 22.9% of households in Stoke-on-Trent live in fuel poverty and this is expected to increase given the ongoing rise in cost of fuel¹⁵.

In 2021, Stoke-on-Trent was shown to have 4.4% of all households to be overcrowded. This was lower than the average for the nearest neighbours based on the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)¹⁶, which is illustrated by figure 8.

Figure 8: Graph showing percentage of households with 1 or more rooms too few for Stoke-on-Trent and CIPFA nearest neighbours in 2021¹⁶.



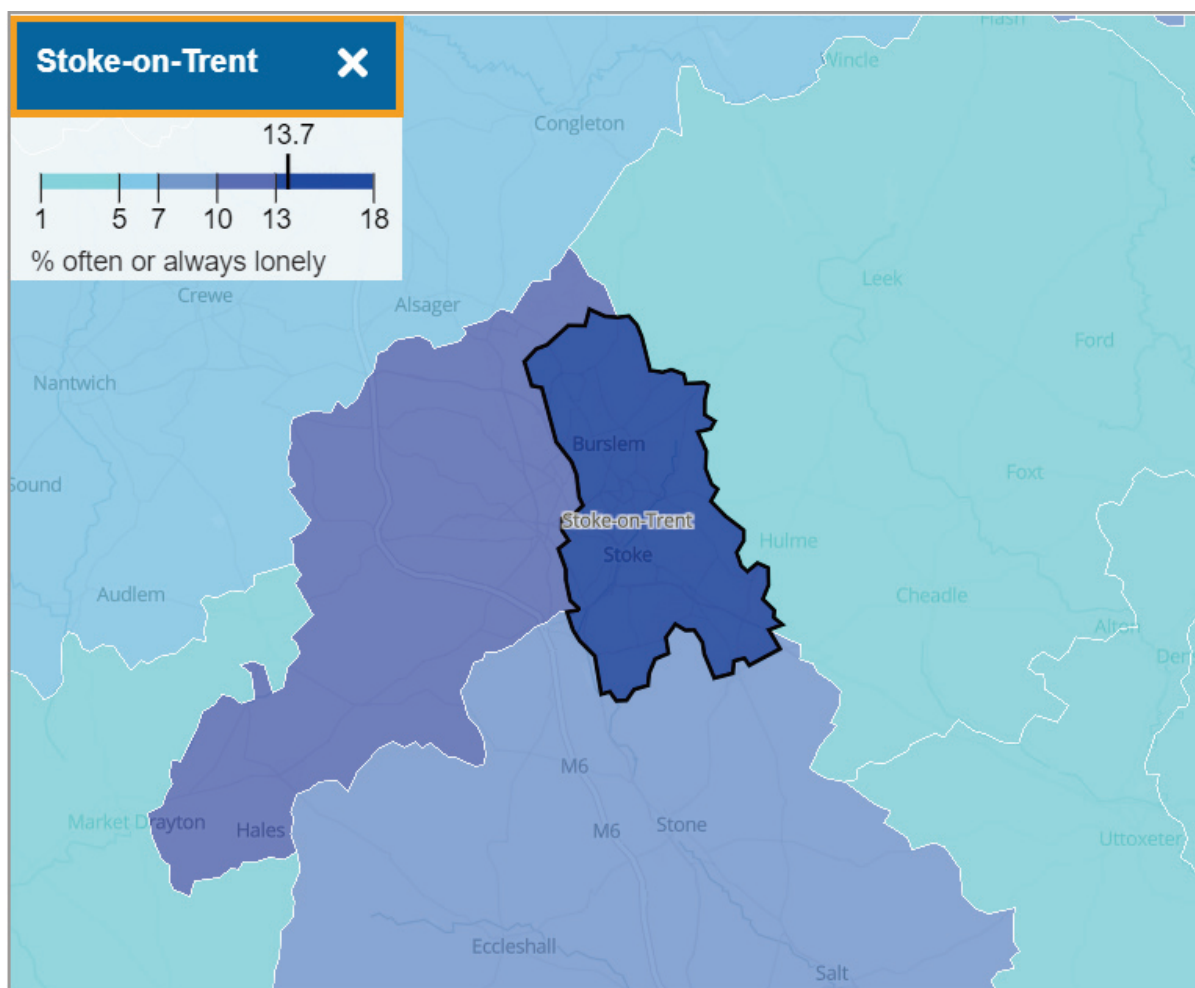
While housing is an important factor and contributor to positive mental wellbeing, poor quality housing has been shown to be detrimental to metal health and wellbeing.

Being Connected

Social isolation is heavily associated with loneliness, which has been shown to negatively affect mental wellbeing, particularly in older age groups and people with disabilities or caring needs.

In 2020/21, the proportion of Stoke-on-Trent residents reported feeling lonely often or always was 13.7%, this was higher than all the surrounding areas (figure 9)¹⁷.

Figure 9: Loneliness rates by local authority in 2020/21¹⁷.



The percentage of adult social care users in Stoke-on-Trent in 2022/23 satisfied with the social contact they had was 42.6% compared to a national average of 44.4%, this was 2% higher than the year before. Whereas with social care users over 65 years of age it remained broadly similar, 40.3% were satisfied compared to a national average of 41.5%⁵.

What don't we know?

More areas relating to wellbeing in Stoke-on-Trent need to be investigated to give us a better indication of where actions are needed most and to enable us to better track the progress the Council is making in addressing these issues. A reduction in these gaps in knowledge will be essential in enabling a more targeted and effective approach to addressing wellbeing needs in the city.

1. Data from the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) council survey – planned for Autumn 2024.
2. Specific data on benefit take-up and debt in Stoke-on-Trent.
3. Specific breakdown on suicide data with regards to locations, modalities, demographics, and premorbid mental and physical health.

Important Role of Individuals, Communities and Organisations

Interventions for improved mental wellbeing could be classified into three main approaches: individual efforts, community efforts, Institutional efforts.

My/Your Mental Wellbeing – looking after our own mental wellbeing

The 5 ways to wellbeing initiative (figure 10) are the outcome of extensive research by the new economics foundation to provide evidence-based actions to improve personal wellbeing.

Figure 10: 5 steps to wellbeing



These 5 ways to wellbeing are:

1. **Connect:** Forming connections with other people in the community, at home, or even at work forms vital relationships and could be sources of enrichment and support. Social relationships are vital for promoting better mental health and wellbeing acts as a protective factor against ill mental health.
2. **Be active:** Going for a brief exercise like walking, cycling, or any form of physical movement especially a physical activity that one enjoys. Regular physical exercise is associated with better wellbeing and lower prevalence of depression and anxiety in all age groups.
3. **Keep learning:** Learning new skills and information could bring a feeling of achievement, purpose, and confidence. This could in turn improve self-esteem and mental wellbeing.
4. **Give:** Studies show that taking part in social community causes and helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy compared to others that don't.
5. **Take notice:** Being aware of one's environment and seasonal changes, being in the moment and reflecting on experiences could help with wellbeing as this increases appreciation of what matters to individuals¹⁸. This could be described as a state of mindfulness.

Why is it important to look after our own mental wellbeing?

We lead busy lives, and it can be easy to forget to prioritise yourself, especially when you have numerous responsibilities and others to care for. Taking care of yourself will improve your overall wellbeing and help you address some of the core aspects of mental health (e.g. work, money, and housing) discussed in Chapter 1. The idea of self-care might sometimes make you feel like you are being selfish, particularly if you are responsible for others (e.g. children, parents, vulnerable adults). However, unless you are equipped both mentally and physically, fulfilling all your caring responsibilities will be very difficult. Think of it like maintaining a car—if you don't keep it well-serviced and fuelled, it won't run efficiently, and eventually, it will break down. The same applies to mental wellbeing.

Our mental wellbeing affects all areas of life and looking after it can really improve how we feel every day. Taking care of our mental wellbeing when we are in a good place is also crucial because it helps us to cope better when future challenges arise.

Find the time to look after our own mental wellbeing

Self-care doesn't have to be time-consuming or expensive. It could be as simple as enjoying a quiet moment with a cup of tea, spending time in nature, practising mindfulness, or indulging in a hobby you love. The key is to make a conscious effort to prioritise your wellbeing, even if it's just for a short period each day. Small, consistent acts of self-care can make a significant difference in how you feel and function, helping you to recharge and face your responsibilities with renewed energy.

Importance of routine in looking after our own mental wellbeing

Routines are a series of regular actions that become almost second nature. When a certain practice helps solve or improve a situation, it makes sense to incorporate that practice into our regular schedule. Positive routines help us conserve energy and free up our mental capacity to tackle more pressing issues in our daily lives.

Consider the saying, "Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves." This familiar phrase suggests that small, consistent actions can lead to significant results. Similarly, establishing and maintaining healthy routines can prevent larger health problems down the line. Rather than just focusing on one healthy habit, such as eating apples, it's more beneficial to routinely incorporate a variety of healthy practices into our lifestyle. This holistic approach ensures lasting changes that support our overall wellbeing. This principle is equally important for our mental health. By identifying and maintaining achievable changes that enhance our mental wellbeing, we can ensure they become a sustainable part of our daily routine.

Factors that put residents at an increased risk of low mental wellbeing

Research indicates that certain groups of residents are at a higher risk of experiencing low mental wellbeing. This includes individuals who are unemployed, carers, men, and members of specific ethnic minorities. It is crucial for everyone, but especially those in these vulnerable groups, to recognise when they might need extra support with their mental health. Identifying early signs and seeking help can make a significant difference in managing and improving overall wellbeing.

Benefitting from “Changes” – a charity offering mental health support

Brian lived with his parents and his pre-existing mental health condition made it difficult for him to work and maintain relationships. Brian accessed Changes after reading a leaflet when admitted to hospital for the management of a bout of acute anxiety and depression.

Despite attending Changes' peer-support groups, Brian felt “stuck” and was unable to fully participate in the activities. Hence his care was further supplemented with more intense one-to-one support. Gradually, he began to recover – engaging with his group, learning ways to self-manage his condition and set himself relevant goals.

As his condition improved, as part of his Wellness Action Plan (WAP) Brian attended Changes' social events. Whilst challenging, this eventually helped him to feel more comfortable mixing with people and increased his confidence in social situations. Brian's 'recovery goals' were rebuilding his relationships and socialising with family and friends. They also included him pursuing new pastimes, e.g. going to the gym, cooking, entering quiz competitions.

As his confidence grew and he began to recover from his condition, Brian was invited to train as a Group Coordinator. Due to his academic background, he enjoyed it and was successful, progressing to work for Changes as a volunteer trainer. Then, through encouragement from his group and peers, Brian went for an interview and was successful in securing a post within Changes as a 'Wellbeing Trainer'. He continues to be a valuable member of the Changes team.

Brian is now medication-free and has been discharged from statutory services – and has his own flat.

Stoke-on-Trent Director of Public Health Recommendations

What more could be done to look after your own mental wellbeing?

Based on what we have learnt above, I recommend for every resident to:

1. Take time to understand your own mental health and recognise any signs of low wellbeing, such as persistent sadness, anxiety, or changes in sleep patterns and appetite.
2. Reach out for help if you feel overwhelmed or find it difficult to cope. This could involve talking to a trusted friend, family member or seeking professional support from a counsellor or therapist.
3. Maintain a balanced diet, regular physical exercise, and sufficient sleep. Physical health is closely linked to mental wellbeing, so taking care of your body will positively impact your mind.

Our wellbeing at a community level

A community approach to wellbeing is just as essential as individual approach and initiative. The 5 ways to wellbeing used in individual wellbeing approach can also be applied to community approach to improving mental wellbeing. An application of the 5 ways to wellbeing from a community approach could be as follows:

1. **Connect:** Check in with your neighbours and other members of your community. Community based social events could help form enriching social connections which in turn create a support system for residents in the city. For some ideas, have a look at our 'Things To Do' section on www.stokecommunitydirectory.co.uk.
2. **Be active:** Try group fitness and leisure activities like group walks and runs. This could make physical activity more enjoyable and motivating as it's undertaken in group settings. This could also prove useful for people who struggle with loneliness. Explore the Sports section on www.stoke.gov.uk to see what our area has to offer.
3. **Keep learning:** This could be applied to learning about different cultures, learning about the local community and picking up new skills in the community. For instance, the u3a group help older adults no longer in employment to learn new skills like photography, arts and music in an informal setting. You can find more on the Adult Education section on www.stoke.gov.uk.
4. **Give:** This could be in the form of volunteering services. A lot of services provided in the city, especially mental health and wellbeing related, are provided by VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprises). This could also be in the form of small acts of kindness within the community. For more information on local volunteering opportunities, visit the Volunteering section on www.vast.org.uk.
5. **Take notice:** Community based wellbeing events focusing on self-reflection and gratitude like local mindfulness sessions.

The importance of communities

Our communities are pivotal to our mental wellbeing. Here are some key aspects that strong communities provide:

Belonging - If you or your family feel out of place, it can be a deeply isolating experience. A community offers a sense of belonging and a group with which to identify. True belonging means feeling accepted and valued for who you are, without needing to alter yourself to fit in. It allows individuals to feel part of the community and to be embraced and appreciated for their uniqueness.

Support - Access to people or local organisations for conversation or assistance is invaluable. Some challenges can seem insurmountable when faced alone. The presence of community members who can provide support fosters feelings of care, safety, and a more optimistic outlook on the future.

Purpose - Individuals contribute to their communities in various ways. Some might assist with moving heavy items, prepare a meal for someone, offer a listening ear, or coach a local sports team. These actions, besides being kind, provide a sense of purpose through enhancing others' lives. Having a sense of purpose and aiding others brings meaning to life and promotes positive mental wellbeing.

Assets - The assets within communities serve as the foundation for robust mental wellbeing. These essential elements include the skills and expertise of community members, the support and camaraderie of neighbours, and the activities of local groups like book clubs and gardening societies. Voluntary and charitable organisations, such as community centres and housing associations, play a vital role, as do public amenities like parks, green spaces, and healthcare services. Reliable transport links, including roads and canals, along with private sector contributions like local pubs and gyms, further enhance the community's ability to support its members' mental health.

Therefore, communities are vital to our mental wellbeing, and by working together, we can positively impact both our own mental health and that of others.

The Need for Greater Engagement and Dialogue

To fully unlock the potential of our community assets and lay the groundwork for improved mental wellbeing, we must adopt a more people-centric and community-focused approach in shaping Stoke-on-Trent's policies and delivering support programmes. This shift necessitates greater community voice, control, and participation.

According to the WHO, increased community participation fosters environments that support positive mental wellbeing and sustainable support systems. Engaging the community more deeply will help:

- Cultivate a sense of belonging by actively including marginalized groups.
- Empower individuals and communities to take control of their lives.
- Utilise community resources to their fullest potential.
- Provide comprehensive support addressing multiple issues simultaneously.
- Enhance community ownership and responsibility.

Connected communities create supportive environments, discouraging negative behaviours such as crime and substance misuse, and promoting overall positive mental wellbeing.

CASE STUDY:

Benefitting from Parkinson's exercise session in our leisure centre

A 63-year-old gentleman who worked as a shop assistance for 23 years had to retire due to health problems. He was diagnosed with ataxia which is quite a rare condition that affects the muscles, balance, coordination and speech. Before the diagnosis he was always active playing football and involved in local lads and dads football. He also enjoyed martial arts, where he gained a black belt in Karate, a blue belt in Aikido and took part in a number of competitions.

Originally signposted to the Friday afternoon Parkinson's exercise session at Fenton Manor by his Neuro Physiotherapist, he now attends this session with his wife every week.

Initially he was really nervous about meeting new people for the first time because of his ataxia but felt that the group was friendly and very welcoming. He struggled mentally to come to terms with the impact of the diagnoses and the loss of independence that has resulted. However, he enjoys the social element of the session, said that usually he would have given up by this point but enjoys the fun factor in the session and intends to keep coming to the sessions for the support.

Previously, he tended to avoid talking as he was self-conscious because of the difficulties with his speech but now has found the class and the instructors, Shell and Ange, supportive and encouraging. He completes the home exercises given daily and has improved at functional tasks, including the ability to perform sit to stand movements, and his walking gait and is now able now able to take a longer stride.

Smith (not his real name), commented: My walking gait has improved due to focusing on my stride pattern in the circuit style sessions, under supervision of the class instructors.

"I recently had a fall at home but after using the skills learnt in the class about how to get down to the floor and back up, I was able to apply these techniques and get myself up from the floor, even using my weaker leg! I have implemented advice around eating healthier and changed some old habits and this has helped me to reduce my blood glucose levels."

Stoke-on-Trent Director of Public Health Recommendations –

What can we do as a community to look after our mental health?

Based on what we have learnt above, I recommend for our communities to:

1. Make use of public spaces, community activities, volunteering opportunities and befriending services to reduce loneliness, create support networks and support community growth.
2. Encourage physical activity through promoting and organising group fitness classes, sporting events and recreational activities for all ages.
3. Empower people to participate in local decision-making processes to ensure representation and inclusivity and foster a safe community for everyone to be able to express their identity, share their culture and feel like they belong.

Parkinson's exercise class at Fenton Manor



What is already happening in Stoke-on-Trent?

- The Voluntary and community sector provides a range of services for citizens of all ages to support mental health and wellbeing.
- Family hubs - bringing together a 'one stop shop' to make access to services easier. Providing face-to-face support and information supporting families with access, connection and relationships.
- Targeted support 'Thrive at Five' - supporting children from disadvantages backgrounds to achieve a good level of development at five. The opportunity to receive advice and support from parent champions and practitioners.
- Support for children and young people - Stay Well CYP services. This service is providing weekly peer-support groups, bite-sized training programmes, psycho-educational workshops, teacher and parent training, and digital training sessions for professionals and volunteers.
- Support for children in schools through the Mental Health Support Team (MHST) working with staff to signpost to the right service at the right time. Where needed, provide evidenced based interventions such as low intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).
- Enhanced Mental Health Support in Schools - delivers one-to-one interventions, group support, drop-in sessions and classroom-based activities. This is delivered for young people, parents and professionals with a mental health practitioner working from the school 5 days a week.
- NHS Talking Therapy service.
- Nineteen Community lounges across the city which offer welcoming spaces to connect with experts and receive helpful information and guidance on a wide range of topics.
- Social prescribers through the Primary Care Network and locality connectors from the City Council are working with citizens to improve health and wellbeing, and supporting them to feel empowered, connected and independent.
- The city council and partners work together to support residents through the cost of living crisis and cold winter months focusing on money, energy and food.
- Employment services are working to provide support to those who are unemployed and economically inactive.

What else could be done?

Becoming a signatory to the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health:

This will allow for collaborative approach to mental health and wellbeing in the city through the partnerships between local authorities, public services and community-based organisations towards prevention of mental health issues. This allows for the coordinated implementation of comprehensive strategies to address the root cause of mental ill health. Through the concordat, the city can prioritise early intervention and prevention initiatives focusing on promoting mental wellbeing and resilience across the lifespan.

This could be through campaigns for mental health awareness, targeted support for vulnerable individuals like members of the LGBTQ+ communities and people from ethnic minority backgrounds groups and interventions in schools and workplace to promote mental health literacy. Combined with further research into the determinants of mental health mentioned in Chapter 2, joining the concordat will provide the council with a framework for taking a holistic and proactive approach to mental health and ultimately leading to improved wellbeing. A paper on this was submitted to the June 2024 Health and Wellbeing Board seeking the Board's support for this, which was agreed at the meeting.

Reviewing the transition of children and young people to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS):

The transition of children and young people from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to AMHS is not smooth and patients often experience gaps in their care which can worsen mental wellbeing and exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions¹⁹.

Nationally, there are different approaches being trailed to improve the transition, such as joint CAMHS and AMHS clinics during the transition period or extending the age cut off for transition from CAMHS. By supporting a review of the local transition pathway and systems and encouraging local mental health services and community support organisations to support this, the continuity of care for many vulnerable young adults would improve leading to better mental wellbeing at a crucial time for them.

Supporting existing community and third sector organisation services and initiatives:

As highlighted previously in this report, Stoke-on-Trent already has a significant number of local amenities, community events and services that are having a positive impact on the wellbeing of our residents but are not being fully utilised.

Promoting their use through organising community events or running awareness campaigns should enable our residents to better understand what is available to them and encourage them to use it, thus helping them improve their wellbeing on their own or as a community.

Stoke-on-Trent Director of Public Health Recommendations: What more could be done by the City Council?

Based on what we have learnt above, I recommend that Stoke-on-Trent City Council:

1. Take a lead and work with partners to sign-up to the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health. This will strengthen the actions we can take in partnership with other organisations and provide a holistic approach to positive mental wellbeing.
2. Further strengthen our support of the loneliness partnership to raise awareness of loneliness and social isolation, reduce stigma, and to promote connections between residents through volunteering opportunities, community social networks and befriending schemes.
3. Work to highlight existing local amenities, community events and third sector organisations providing services in our area to increase awareness of them and encourage their use by our residents, thereby enabling our residents to take their wellbeing into their own hands.

Conclusion

The most important message from this year's Director of Public Health Annual Report is that improving mental wellbeing across Stoke-on-Trent is a collective effort. No single individual or organisation can achieve this alone. It is essential for individuals, communities, and organisations to collaborate and work together. We must deepen our understanding of mental wellbeing and learn how we can support ourselves and each other. Empowering communities to make decisions and tailor support to their unique needs is crucial. Organisations, both local and national, must be open to facilitating this empowerment consistently. This might necessitate changes in organisational operations and, over time, a cultural shift towards community-centred and co-designed approaches becoming the norm. We have already seen commendable efforts supporting mental wellbeing across the city, such as the Staffordshire Mental Health Helpline extended hours started during the pandemic and employment support services like the Jobs, Enterprise and Training service (JET). By applying the lessons learned from our previous successful initiatives and partnerships and identifying residents most at risk of poor mental wellbeing, we can enhance our support systems and local services to better serve those in need. Together, we can make a significant difference.

Summary of recommendations:

I recommend every resident:

1. Take time to understand your own mental health and recognise any signs of low wellbeing, such as persistent sadness, anxiety, or changes in sleep patterns and appetite.
2. Reach out for help if you feel overwhelmed or find it difficult to cope. This could involve talking to a trusted friend, family member or seeking professional support from a counsellor or therapist.
3. Maintain a balanced diet, regular physical exercise, and sufficient sleep. Physical health is closely linked to mental wellbeing, so taking care of your body will positively impact your mind.

I recommend our communities:

1. Make use of public spaces, community activities, volunteering opportunities and befriending services to reduce loneliness, create support networks and support community growth.
2. Encourage physical activity through promoting and organising group fitness classes, sporting events and recreational activities for all ages.
3. Empower people to participate in local decision-making processes to ensure representation and inclusivity and foster a safe community for everyone to be able to express their identity, share their culture and feel like they belong.

I recommend Stoke-on-Trent City Council:

1. Take a lead and work with partners to sign up to the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health. This will strengthen the actions we can take in partnership with other organisations and provide a holistic approach to positive mental wellbeing.
2. Further strengthen our support of the loneliness partnership to raise awareness of loneliness and social isolation, reduce stigma, and to promote connections between residents through volunteering opportunities, community social networks and befriending schemes.
3. Work to highlight existing local amenities, community events and third sector organisations providing services in our area to increase awareness of them and encourage their use by our residents, thereby enabling our residents to take their wellbeing into their own hands.

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Appendix 1

2023 DPHAR Recommendation	Actions achieved as of August 2024
<p>Strengthen the VCSE sector by enhancing the social fabric of all communities across the city through social listening, coproduction and delivery of interventions</p>	<p>We have put in place a five-year partnership with VAST Services to provide independent voluntary, community and social enterprise sector support in the city.</p> <p>We have implemented a five-year City Alliance Agreement with the VCSE sector and Faith sector to support the people and communities of Stoke-on-Trent.</p> <p>In our 2024-28 corporate strategy “Our City, Our Wellbeing”, we have included prioritising and working with voluntary organisations to ensure families are helped to give their children the best start in life as a key objective.</p> <p>In our corporate strategy we have committed to establishing an economic development model which prioritises community wellbeing and promotes community wealth building. To achieve this, we have launched consultations on our new strategy to create a wellbeing economy for our city.</p>
<p>Introduce a Family Support approach for the city that helps families to give their children the best start in life, including better housing, education and help when things start to go wrong.</p>	<p>We have opened a network of Family Hubs across the city to provide a single point to access support from a range of services.</p> <p>We have launched a Digital Family Hub to provide advice and information on a variety of topics for parents/guardians tailored to all ages.</p> <p>We introduced Parent and Child exercise classes within leisure centres.</p> <p>From September we have planned to introduce a new role to the Leisure & Wellbeing Team; Play Programme Development Manager, who will develop a programme working with locally trusted organisations in the city.</p> <p>As part of the corporate strategy, the Council has committed to prioritising and working with the voluntary and community sector to ensure families are helped to give their children the best start in life.</p>

Appendix 1

2023 DPHAR Recommendation	Actions achieved as of August 2024
<p>Develop support for people to stay in work or gain employment where their health is a primary barrier working collaboratively across the City with public and private and community organisations.</p>	<p>We have developed a Workplace Cardiovascular Disease Check programme which will be launching soon. This will reach employees who would typically not attend ones offered routinely by their GP to spot early signs of heart disease and offer information on risk reduction of heart disease and offer information on risk reduction.</p> <p>The Council corporate strategy has adopted reducing the number of adults who are economically inactive due to long-term health problems as a key corporate strategy objective.</p> <p>To accomplish this, the Council has worked with health partners and employers to develop effective approaches to prevention, support and rehabilitation.</p>
<p>To take action to reduce infant mortality through an inter-agency working, bringing together stakeholders to implement evidenced based action.</p>	<p>We established an Integrated Care System Infant Mortality Steering Group which has oversight over various working groups responsible for delivery in key areas like smoking in pregnancy, infant feeding, perinatal mental health and safer sleep.</p>

Appendix 1

2023 DPHAR Recommendation	Actions achieved as of August 2024
<p>Develop a city-wide approach to increasing physical activity, using the levers through policy and assets of the City to make being physically active easier.</p>	<p>We opened a new gymnastics centre in Burslem with classes for children and adults.</p> <p>We have started to re-model the service offer within leisure centres, ensuring a good variety of accessible classes, with varying intensity. A particular focus has been on increasing low intensity classes.</p> <p>We have secured over £270k investment from the LTA to refurbish 16 of our park's tennis courts. Officers are working with external stakeholders to develop the activation plan to drive participation levels.</p> <p>We have started development on an Active Wellbeing Strategy, expected to be finalised March 2025.</p> <p>We have more specialist instructors delivering FaME programmes in community settings, most recently a 26-week programme at the QE2 (extra care facility) and currently at Port Vale FC, to support elderly residents with falls prevention.</p> <p>We started working with the Stoke consortium to develop the bid for Sport England's Place Expansion Fund; led by the active partnership, Together Active.</p> <p>We developed the Health and Wellbeing membership within centres to encourage more residents, on a targeted basis, to become physically active. (e.g. those who were referred to the Pumping Marvellous Health Screening event).</p> <p>We have been successful in applying to the Football Foundation for a Playzone at Port Vale FC (Burslem) and The Crescent Academy (Meir) to develop a multi-sports facility in the hearts of communities to encourage participation, particularly from under-represented groups (pending a planning application).</p>

