

A briefing from SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health)

Sport, Physical Activity and Mental Health – The State of Play

Being physically active has been proven to improve mood, protect mental wellbeing, and improve a person's quality of life when experiencing a mental health problem.¹ However, in Scotland, one in three people currently do not meet the World Health Organisation's guidelines for physical activity.²

People experiencing mental ill-health are less likely to be physically active than those experiencing a high level of mental wellbeing.³ Physical activity levels decline as deprivation increases; with those in deprived areas also at a greater risk of experiencing mental ill-health.

Increasing physical activity reduces the likelihood of experiencing low mood, depression, tension and worry.⁴ Using sport and physical activity to improve the lives of people experiencing a mental health problem and to improve the mental wellbeing of everyone in Scotland should be a central tenet of health and social policy. Fully realising the potential of sport and physical activity to change lives would have a profound economic and social impact.

The Power of Physical Activity - SAMH's Current Work

Every day at SAMH, we harness the power of sport to improve the mental health of people living in Scotland. We do this through a variety of innovative services and projects.

ALBA (Active Living Becomes Achievable)

SAMH's ALBA project was created as a result of Action 31 of the Mental Health Strategy 2017-27⁵. Our ALBA project works directly with people referred to the programme by healthcare professionals. A Behaviour Change Practitioner provides 16 weeks of one-to-one support: initially helping a person build the confidence and self-esteem required to become physically active; and then supporting someone to take part in the physical activity of their choice.

Our ALBA project has helped numerous people achieve an active lifestyle in the three areas the project is currently working in: West Lothian, North Ayrshire and Fife. Craig, received support from the ALBA project that in his words started his mental health recovery:

'I was put in touch with SAMH's ALBA (Active Living Becomes Achievable) project and this is where my recovery really started.' Read more about [Craig's story](#).

SAMH calls for continued support of Action 31 for the full duration of the Mental Health Strategy 2017-27.

The Changing Room

SAMH launched the Changing Room project in 2018, with the aim of using the collective power of football to promote men's mental health. The project is delivered in partnership by SAMH, the SPFL Trust, Hibernian Football Club and Hearts Football Club; with funding from the Movember Foundation. Our aim is to have a Changing Room in every professional club in Scotland, creating a collective safe space for men to talk openly about and receive support to improve their mental health.

Scotland's Mental Health Charter for Physical Activity and Sport

In February last year, SAMH launched Scotland's Mental Health Charter for Physical Activity and Sport. The first of its kind; the Charter enables sporting organisations from grassroots to elite level to set out how they plan to make engaging, participating and achieving in sport more accessible to people experiencing a mental health problem. Over three hundred people who themselves have experienced a mental health problem helped inform and create the Charter.

Our vision is for all sporting organisations and clubs in Scotland to sign up to the Charter. An interactive map of Charter signatories in your constituency can be [viewed online](#). The map allows members of the public to find a club that is a signatory; improving the confidence of people with mental health problems that they will be supported and included.

Fulfilling the Potential of Sport and Physical Activity to Change Lives

We welcome the progress made by the Scottish Government to increase physical activity levels, helping improve the lives of people experiencing mental ill-health. However, there is more to do to in order to achieve a Scotland where everyone is supported and enabled to be physically active, ultimately improving Scotland's mental health.

Exercise Referral Schemes for people experiencing mental ill-health

Medical guidelines set out by NICE and SIGN for the treatment of mild-moderate depression include prescribing exercise referral schemes^{6,7}. Currently access to an Exercise Referral Scheme can be limited depending on where in Scotland a person lives⁸. SAMH believes everyone across Scotland should have access to an Exercise Referral Scheme for support to become active. This should be accessible at no cost to the participant, creating parity between a green prescription and a pharmaceutical prescription.

Action 3 from A More Active Scotland: Scotland's Physical Activity Delivery Plan (2018)⁹ commits to 'encouraging social prescribing initiatives which refer patients from the NHS to community-based interventions to support increased physical activity'. We are encouraged by this commitment and await further progress to ensure that exercise on prescription free of charge is available nationwide.

Planning for Active Communities

Factors outwith the control of individuals – transport, access to green space and neighbourhood design – affect physical activity levels. Planning guidelines should ensure that the impact on mental health and physical activity levels is at the centre of consideration for proposed plans. Access to green space naturally fosters physical activity, in turn promoting psychological restoration and improved mood.

Creating Inclusivity

Every sporting club or organisation that receives funding from the Scottish Government should be inclusive to those experiencing mental ill-health. By signing up to Scotland's Mental Health Charter for Physical Activity and Sport, organisations make clear their commitment to inclusivity. Signatories to the Charter are also required to set out in an action plan how they will be enable those experiencing mental ill-health to engage, participate and achieve in sport.

SAMH wants to see all sporting organisations and clubs in Scotland become signatories to the Charter. To improve the lives of more people experiencing mental ill-health in Scotland, sporting organisations in receipt of Scottish Government funding should be required to sign up to Scotland's Mental Health Charter for Physical Activity and Sport, therefore demonstrating their commitment to being open and inclusive for people with a mental health problem.

Further Information

For further information on the contents of this briefing, please contact Debbie Horne, Public Affairs Assistant, by email at Debbie.Horne@samh.org.uk or by calling 0141 530 1080.

¹ Bauman, A., [Updating the evidence that physical activity is good for health: an epidemiological review 2000–2003](#), (2004)

² Scottish Government, [Health of Scotland's population – Physical Activity](#)

³ Shor, R & Shalev, A, [Barriers to involvement in physical activities of person with mental illness](#), (2014)

⁴ Royal College of Psychiatrists, [Physical Activity and Mental Health](#)

⁵ Scottish Government, [Mental Health Strategy 2017-27](#) (2017)

⁶ [SIGN guidelines](#)

⁷ [NICE guidelines](#)

⁸ NHS Health Scotland, [Audit of Exercise Referral Schemes](#), (2010)

⁹ Scottish Government, [A More Active Scotland: Scotland's Physical Activity Delivery Plan](#), (2018)