

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the nation's health: Time to get proactive on prevention?



Summary of roundtable discussion, 13.06.2023

BACKGROUND

- On 13 June Nuffield Health convened a roundtable discussion at the House of Commons, supported by Kim Leadbeater MP and Dr Lisa Cameron MP, about our report entitled '*The State of the Nation's Health and Wellbeing in 2023*'.
- The report summarises the findings of the third annual Healthier Nation Index. Based on a survey of 8,000 UK adults, the Index provides a detailed review of all aspects of the nation's physical and mental health.
- The report reveals the toll the cost-of-living crisis is taking on the nation's well-being. Many adults report worsening health, and the hardest hit are younger people, those with long-term health issues and lower earners. However, exercise levels have shown improvement for the first time in three years, along with increasing awareness of the benefits that moving more can have on both body and mind.
- Over the last 12 months:

48.5% said their **financial health** was significantly or slightly **worse**

35.1% said their **physical health** was significantly or slightly **worse**

33.7% said their **mental or emotional health** was slightly or significantly **worse**

48.6% said their **quality of sleep** was significantly or slightly **worse**

63.2% said the **cost-of-living crisis** is having a **negative impact** on the nation's health

Two thirds of those **aged 25-34** stated **cost is a barrier to exercise**

3 in 5 people said the **cost-of-living crisis** has **negatively impacted their mental health**

People with 'very bad' health are **nearly twice as likely** to feel lonely at least once a week

THE DISCUSSION

Attendees were invited to reflect on the findings and share their insights in response to three questions:

- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis:** Given the findings of this year's Healthier Nation Index, has the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the nation's physical and mental health been fully recognised? Are we responding as a nation?
- The role of physical activity:** To what extent does physical activity hold the key to tackling the root causes of physical and mental ill health and reducing health inequalities?
- Getting proactive on prevention:** What are the major barriers to adopting robust and effective 'prevention-first' policies, and in particular those which promote physical activity? How can we overcome them?

A range of expert stakeholders from different sectors took part in the discussion, representing:

- Arches Local
- the Association of British Insurers
- AXA Health
- Business for Health
- Health Equals
- Intelligent Health
- Loughborough University
- London Borough of Camden
- NHS Confederation
- NHS England
- NHS North East London
- The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change
- UK Active
- The Youth Sport Trust

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- **Physical and mental health are intrinsically linked. As such, initiatives to improve physical health through exercise can only be sustainable if emotional wellbeing is also addressed.** There is a need to embed the concept of 'mental fitness' to ensure that the focus of policy is wider than the treatment of ill health and aims to support people to nurture their mental wellbeing.
- **There needs to be a shift of focus towards the task of building healthy environments.** Policy approaches have tended to focus on individuals changing their behaviour while ignoring the context of the environments where they live and work. The most successful policies will be those which make the healthiest choice the easiest choice.
- **Focussed support is needed for those who are least active.** The Index showed that over 25% of people have spent less than 15 minutes a week on moderate physical activity. Addressing the barriers to physical activity for this group will not be straightforward, particularly in the context of accessibility of public services. For example, parents may be unable to support their children to take advantage of opportunities which already exist, due to factors such as cost or time commitments.
- **Accessible facilities and green spaces are key.** Alleviating barriers to physical inactivity requires communities to have easy access to safe, inclusive and accessible facilities which carefully consider the needs of target groups (e.g. opening times, changing facilities etc).
- **Employers have a key role to play in supporting the health and wellbeing of their workforce.** Working practices have changed beyond recognition in recent years, and employers need to be responding with targeted strategies to support employees in remote or hybrid working environments. This is particularly important for women, who are disproportionately affected by poor mental health in the workplace.
- **Collaboration must happen at all levels and across multiple sectors – not just the NHS.** Integrated Care Systems and local government should ensure they have a clear understanding of all factors contributing to cost-of-living challenges, and must use their convening ability to set out the case for change and to collaborate with local anchor institutions, voluntary and community sector (VCS) partners and local residents.
- **National leadership on prevention is essential, with accountability shared across all government departments – but solutions must ultimately be driven at the local level by those who have the best understanding of the needs of their communities.** Residents within communities can and do play a vital role in the prevention agenda because they have the knowledge and understanding of what matters to their neighbourhoods. There is a need to empower and support residents to be engaged in solutions, from inception to delivery.
- **Within the prevention arena it is important to use clear terminology and objectives.** A broad conversation about 'prevention' will secure wide agreement but will not be effective at driving change. The prevention agenda should not de-prioritise children and young people by taking focus away from the impact of chronic conditions earlier on in life (and in that sense prevention is akin to treatment).