

**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

HEALTHY BRITAIN

A NEW APPROACH TO HEALTH AND
WELLBEING POLICY

Kim Leadbeater MP

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INTRODUCTION

Before becoming an MP, I had a personal and professional background in health, wellbeing, and physical activity. As a backbencher, I am excited by the broad range of Labour policies that would do so much to enhance the health and wellbeing of our citizens. Thirteen years of Tory neglect can and will be reversed by a Labour government.

Our ambition must go beyond undoing the damage done since 2010, however. Our aim should be to ensure people live as well as possible for as long as possible. The purpose of this paper is to propose ways in which the policies to deliver on this ambition can be incorporated into a holistic, cross-departmental strategy that will put the health and wellbeing of the nation on a par with our commitments to rebuild the economy and combat climate change.

Such commitments are, of course, inextricably linked to health and wellbeing. A healthier population would be more productive and boost economic growth, and prioritising prevention and early intervention would reduce public expenditure by reducing the need for costly treatments. Policies that are good for health and wellbeing are often the very same policies that help promote a greener economy, build stronger communities and protect our environment. Improving health and wellbeing can also reduce crime and anti-social behaviour and enable many more people to reach their full potential and make a positive contribution to society throughout their lives.

For these reasons, I believe an incoming Labour government should put health and wellbeing at the front and centre of its promise to the people of Britain. More specifically, we should guarantee that everything we do in government will both be fully costed and meet three essential tests, to:

- Deliver economic growth to make Britain and its people better off.
- Support a fair and prosperous transition to net zero.
- Improve the health and wellbeing of the nation and its citizens.

As Keir Starmer said in his 2023 New Year speech, there has to be an end to the short-term mindset and sticking-plaster solutions that dominate politics.

The proposals outlined here complement his commitment to a more strategic, missions-led approach to government with a new way of governing. They require no immediate additional spending and indeed would soon start to produce cost savings in many areas.

Keir committed to integrating wellbeing into policymaking in his party conference speeches in 2021 and 2022. By building on this commitment, Labour has the opportunity to take a radically new approach to government – one that will greatly benefit individuals, families, communities, businesses and the nation, while reducing pressure on both the NHS and public expenditure.

What do we mean by health and wellbeing?

The World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

Wellbeing itself can be harder to define. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is “the state of being healthy, happy or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare; a good or safe condition; an ability to flourish or prosper”. The Office for National Statistics defines it as “how we’re doing – as individuals, communities and as a nation – and how sustainable [this condition] is”. The Treasury’s Green Book calls it “social value”.

While such definitions are useful, we must be careful not to allow them to narrow our thinking. As Lord Ara Darzi of Imperial College’s Institute of Global Health Innovation, puts it: “We think of people as being either healthy or sick, but there is a big gap in the middle.”

In general, though, we know wellbeing when we see it. What is beyond doubt is that it is dependent on numerous interlinked aspects of our daily lives, from the environment to the workplace, and from housing to the ability to take physical exercise.¹

It incorporates:

- physical health and wellbeing
- mental health and wellbeing
- social health and wellbeing

If we look after the health and wellbeing of all, we can, as Lord Darzi says, “add life to our years as well as years to our life”.² And in the words of Lord Nigel Crisp, former chief executive of the NHS, “by getting it right in the home – and in the community, school and workplace – we can create health, resilience, wellbeing and everything that flows from them”.³



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An incoming Labour government should:

- Put health and wellbeing at the heart of its mission-driven programme for government.
- Break government departments out of their silos and ensure they work together to enhance health and wellbeing.
- Incorporate physical, mental and social wellbeing into a holistic strategy.
- Prioritise prevention and early intervention.
- Harness the energy and talents of all sectors of society and the economy.

This approach would:

- Significantly improve the health and wellbeing of all citizens.
- Reduce the incidence of a wide range of illnesses, both physical and mental.
- Help create a more active population, with substantial accompanying health benefits.
- Lead to more people in work, higher productivity and less time lost to ill health.
- Promote social wellbeing through stronger, more resilient communities.
- Relieve pressure on the NHS and social care.
- Reduce the burden on services including the welfare system, police and criminal justice.
- Address health inequalities across the UK.
- Reduce wasteful expenditure and provide for major savings in the future.

To deliver, Labour should:

- Establish a cross-department ministerial group headed by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.
- Require mandatory health and wellbeing impact assessments for all policies.
- Ensure accountability to parliament by establishing a new select committee.

Policies to drive a new approach to health and wellbeing could include:

- Making physical education a core subject at secondary schools and having trained PE specialists in all primary schools.
- Putting physical literacy and wellbeing at the heart of a 'curriculum for life'.
- Supporting positive mental health from an early age and throughout life.
- Increasing social prescribing and curbing the over-prescribing of drugs and medication.
- Enforcing legally binding standards for healthy homes and town and country planning.
- Giving communities power to promote social wellbeing locally.
- Establishing ring-fenced budgets for active travel schemes.
- Offering incentives for businesses to support a healthy workforce.

1: THE CASE FOR CHANGE

- More people in work, higher productivity, and less time lost to ill-health.
- Addressing health inequalities across the UK.
- Reducing wasteful expenditure.

The evidence is overwhelming: health and wellbeing are not just desirable outcomes in and of themselves, but essential components of a programme for growth, productivity, national renewal and opportunity for all.

In particular, the economic benefits of a greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention are clear. People in the working age population (18-65) account for 63 per cent of years lost to poor health, costing the UK £300bn in lost economic output annually.⁴ The cost to the UK economy of poor mental health has been estimated to be in the range of £53-56bn, which equates to more than 2.6 per cent of annual GDP.⁵

Obesity is estimated to cost the UK economy £58bn a year⁶. The British Heart Foundation estimates that the annual cost to the economy of cardiovascular disease is £19bn⁷. NHS England spends around £10bn a year, or 10 per cent of its budget, on diabetes.⁸

Just as ill-health affects the economy, so a poorly balanced economy affects health. Factors that increase the risk of poor health, like an unhealthy diet, a lack of physical activity, smoking, alcohol misuse, low educational attainment, poor housing, insecure employment and pollution are disproportionately more common in areas of relative economic deprivation.

Life expectancy, and the period of people's working lives spent active and healthy, are actually falling in parts of the UK.⁹ A recent analysis by the Economist found that life expectancy stalled in Britain, relative to long-run trends and other countries, in the early 2010s. The slowdown in life expectancy improvement has struck all age groups and disproportionately affected the poor. "If you travel just six miles from the poshest part of Kensington in London to New Cross Gate, life expectancy for men falls by a

staggering 18 years, from 92 to 74.”¹⁰ After stripping out the impact of Covid and the broader trend across Europe, the Economist calculated that around 250,000 more people have died than would have if the pre-2011 growth had continued.

In his new book, Professor Richard Layard argues that “reducing inequality, expanding social safety nets and limiting economic insecurity...are best positioned to promote and support wellbeing.”¹¹ After years of Tory window dressing, an incoming Labour government’s commitment to a genuine strategy for levelling up the nation will start to tackle the social and economic inequalities that are responsible for so much ill-health and lost opportunities. If at the same time we prioritise health and wellbeing, we can take pressure off the NHS budget, save millions currently being wasted on fixing the consequences of economic failure, and enjoy the benefits of increased productivity and growth that go hand-in-hand with a healthier, happier population.

And in the longer term, an effective health and wellbeing strategy would do much more than reduce pressure on the NHS and care budgets. It would also help cut the costs of other programmes and services including welfare, police, prisons, and criminal justice.

As Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, says: “We need to minimise the time people spend in hospital. We have to stop seeing health as this enormous hole into which we pour resources and realise that a healthier population is a more productive, economically active population.”¹²

2: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

- Breaking out of departmental silos.
- Saving money by avoiding waste and duplication.
- Working cross-sector to include government, business, unions and voluntary organisations.

Health professionals, academics, former civil servants and third sector organisations have been calling for government departments to break out of their silos and work together to enhance health and wellbeing for years. Every one of the dozens of individuals and organisations I spoke to for this report wholeheartedly agreed that a change of strategy is essential. Previous governments have paid lip-service and shown good intentions, but until now, Whitehall orthodoxy and inertia have prevailed.

As Labour's mission-driven policy framework states, we need "departments working together rather than in silos. Business working with unions. The private sector working with the public sector. And partnership between national and local government."¹³

We know that joined-up government works. The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, co-chaired by Rachel Reeves, showed how effective a cross-departmental approach can be. And we remember with pride the huge success of Sure Start, which demonstrated cross-departmental work at its best.

The arguments for a new approach are compelling. With no requirement for extra expenditure and the prospect of major savings to come, the only barrier is the readiness to embrace a significant shift in government thinking.

In my view, Labour's programme for government should be underpinned by three essential foundations. Two of these are already in place:

- Our commitment that every promise is fully costed and affordable.

- Our green growth plan guaranteeing both an economic and environmental transformation.

We should now add a third:

- A pledge to put improving the health and wellbeing of all our citizens at the heart of every part of our national recovery programme.

A holistic approach, integrating the work of every department and all activities carried out or overseen by government, would bring together a wide range of interventions throughout the life cycle into one strategy. Ministries would no longer be working towards the same outcomes by different routes, thus reducing wasteful expenditure by avoiding duplication of effort.

Crucially, such an approach would relieve pressure on the health service and social care. For too long, the NHS has concentrated almost exclusively on treating ill-health. More recently, there has been a welcome shift towards preventing illness and early intervention, but the health service is still primarily focused on putting us right when things go wrong. We are, of course, extremely grateful when it does. But while we will always need clinics and hospitals, we will spend less on them if we also pursue a strategy that identifies and promotes the causes of good health.

A number of experts put it to me that the Department of Health and Social Care is essentially the Department for the NHS, a service of which Labour – having created it – remains extremely proud. Responsibility for creating health and wellbeing, however, must be shared across government with every department of state playing its part. Many of the levers for making change happen are in fact outside the NHS.

As Simon Stevens, former NHS Chief Executive, said to me, we should be looking at all policies through a “health and wellbeing lens” just as we do through a “green lens”.

We should also be harnessing the energy and talents of all sectors of society and the economy. The government cannot do everything by itself and should never pretend that it can. To create meaningful change, a cross-sector approach – drawing upon the skills and commitment of individuals, communities, businesses, trade unions, charities, voluntary organisations, the sports and leisure industry and many others – will be necessary.

Both the CBI and the TUC have already embraced the wellbeing agenda. The missing piece of the puzzle is a supportive government. Only Labour has the determination to bring all sides of industry together in an approach that benefits workers and employers alike.

Our party is already committed to using wellbeing indicators alongside economic indicators to measure the impact of our policies. By going further, adopting new ways of working and exploring innovative new policies, we can unleash the potential of everybody to create a healthy society where the wellbeing of all is protected and enhanced.

3: HOW TO DO IT

- Cross-department ministerial group headed by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.
- Mandatory health and wellbeing impact assessments.
- Accountability to parliament with a new select committee.

A minister responsible for health and wellbeing should sit around the Cabinet table. The conventional Whitehall response would be to ask the Cabinet Office to add oversight of health and wellbeing to its many existing responsibilities. Some colleagues support this approach, while former ministers have suggested to me that a new Department of Wellbeing might be preferable in order to give the issue the priority it deserves. However, I believe that assigning the health and wellbeing portfolio to the Treasury is a simpler and more direct way to ensure that every decision and policy announcement takes into account the impact on the health and wellbeing of the nation, is cost-effective, and engages all spending departments.

In 2014, Lord O'Donnell, the former cabinet secretary, argued that government policies should be subjected to a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) that measures overall wellbeing. This could equally be the wellbeing of a community as the wellbeing of individuals or socioeconomic groups. Compared to conventional CBAs, these would, he said, "provide a method for policy evaluation that holds out hope of giving answers that are more relevant to what is really important in people's lives".¹⁴ O'Donnell and his colleagues on the Commission on Wellbeing and Policy urged the Treasury to take the lead in making this happen, and I believe they were right.

In his 2021 party conference speech, Keir Starmer said: "With every pound spent on your behalf we would expect the Treasury to weigh not just its effect on national income, but also its effect on wellbeing." It makes good sense, then, for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to take responsibility for ensuring that, before any money is spent, every policy proposal is measured not just for its financial cost but for its impact in terms of health and wellbeing. This would be consistent with the chief secretary's existing responsibilities for strategic planning, legislative strategy, efficiency and value for money in public service, infrastructure spending, and housing and planning.

The chief secretary – who would also be the wellbeing minister – should convene a cross-departmental ministerial task force like the one which oversaw Sure Start under the last Labour government. At a minimum, it would include ministers from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Education, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport, the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs and the Home Office. The prime minister’s office should be represented at a senior level.

The government’s existing regulatory impact assessment required for proposed legislation, which already includes an assessment of the impact on international trade and investment and the environment, should be expanded to include health and wellbeing.

The Green Book acknowledges that “individual and society’s wellbeing is influenced by a number of interrelated factors including health, relationships, security and purpose”. The ONS, for its part, already tries to measure wellbeing and make international comparisons as part of its efforts to ‘go beyond’ GDP.¹⁵ Under Labour, the Office for Budget Responsibility, or our new Value for Money Office, should be asked to go further, evaluating the impact of all spending with a view to maintaining expenditure which promotes growth and productivity through a healthier and happier workforce and cutting expenditure that is harmful to health and wellbeing. It should produce an annual report including a ‘health and wellbeing index’ to be debated in parliament, and a new select committee should be established to investigate the effectiveness of health and wellbeing policies across all government departments.

4: LABOUR'S POLICY FRAMEWORK

- Building on policy commitments already in place.
- Coordinated public service reform.
- Joined up government.

Labour already has in place a wide range of policies that would improve health and wellbeing across the UK, with more in development.

In a speech in January 2022, Keir Starmer said he wanted to “make wellbeing matter as much as national economic output”. He highlighted the smoking ban, introduced by a Labour government, as an example of prevention in action and cited “social clubs, community centres, sports clubs, green spaces, secure homes and safe streets” as key components of health policy.¹⁶ And in his 2022 party conference speech, he committed to a prevention first policy, setting it out as one of his four key pledges for public services: “I’ve seen it for myself – early intervention saves lives and money ...In health, it’s about moving treatment towards communities, exploring how technology can free up NHS workers to focus on care.”¹⁷

The recognition of sports clubs and green spaces as key parts of health policy illustrates the point that prevention does not have to be strictly medical; it is not all about, for example, vaccinations. As Gordon Brown says: “It is by tackling and eradicating the causes of ill health that we will do most to reduce waiting lists and pressures on the hospital sector.”

As a party, Labour is well-placed to offer a programme of public service reform, devolution and fairer spending priorities from day one to reverse years of Conservative neglect and mismanagement and rebuild the NHS for the future. As our 10-year plan for the NHS says, “Labour will ensure fewer patients need to go to hospital, shifting resources to social care, GPs, care at home and mental health services, reducing the cost of hospital care in the long-term.” By bringing these policies together into a holistic cross-departmental strategy and looking for new and innovative ways to add value across government, Labour can show how we would govern

differently, with the people's priorities at the heart of everything we do, and deliver on those priorities speedily, efficiently and effectively.

Just some of the existing building blocks for the strategy include:

- A mental health guarantee, mental health hubs, and mental health specialists in schools with a focus on early intervention and prevention.
- Recruiting 8,500 new mental health staff to ensure that an additional one million patients will be treated every year.
- More doctors and nurses, lower waiting times, and higher standards for patients.
- Delivering more care in the community by investing in district nurses and health visitors.
- Shifting the focus of health and care services from late diagnosis and treatment of illness to prevention, early intervention and keeping people living well for longer.
- Reaching people struggling with addiction or mental health problems before they became unable to work.
- A school improvement programme.
- Breakfast clubs in schools.
- Expanding clean energy and passing a new Clean Air Act.
- Encouraging more people onto public transport and promoting active travel.
- More affordable homes, social housing, and homes for life.
- Revitalising high streets.
- Require social value in government procurement.

5: FRESH THINKING AND MEANINGFUL IMPACT

- Opening up space for new initiatives.
- Learning from what works across Britain and internationally.
- Raising our ambitions.

A radical and comprehensive strategy must build on these foundations, look for fresh ideas, and be ready to learn from best practice already implemented both internationally and within the UK at national, regional and local levels. Examples include New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in Wales, and brilliant schemes pursued by many local councils and combined authorities including Greater Manchester's Live Well Service, Wigan's Deal for Health and Wellness and Lambeth's Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

I am not proposing a raft of untried or uncosted policies. Instead, we should see whether existing plans can be made more ambitious, better targeted, or more effective. We should also focus on the cost *savings* that can be made by focusing much more on prevention and early intervention. According to analysis by the Economist, it costs nearly four times as much to gain an extra year of good health via clinical interventions than through public health programmes.

What follows are some suggestions which take a holistic approach to wellbeing, focusing on prevention and early intervention and joined up cross-government and cross-sector thinking. These are things that could be set in train from day one of an incoming Labour government.

Before becoming an MP, I had a personal and professional background in health, wellbeing, and physical activity. As a backbencher, I am excited by the broad range of Labour policies that would do so much to enhance the

health and wellbeing of our citizens. Thirteen years of Tory neglect can and will be reversed by a Labour government.

Building the foundations for wellbeing

Physical literacy and PE

As Simon Stevens told me, health experts often observe that: “If physical exercise was a medicine, it would be a miracle drug.” During the pandemic, Sir Chris Whitty, too, stressed the importance of physical exercise to public health, arguing: “There is no situation, there is no age, and no condition where exercise is not a good thing.”¹⁸

These habits must be established at an early age. We need a national drive to get every child to be more active in order to meet the current guidelines of at least 180 minutes a day from birth to five years old and 60 minutes a day for five to 18-year-olds.¹⁹ In their first years at school, children can spend around 20 per cent of the school day in ‘play’ without any proper guidance or a training plan for teachers to maximise its long-term benefits and with no real method of evaluation.²⁰ We should make PE a core curriculum subject in secondary schools and, through the ongoing teacher recruitment process, ensure over time that every primary school has an enthusiastic, fully qualified PE specialist to support staff in engaging young people in sport, PE, and physical activity across the school day. Physical literacy – understanding the holistic foundation for physical competence and activity – should be incorporated in all teacher training.

Healthy children and young people

Our children deserve the best start in life. Parents want their kids to be happy and healthy and they deserve support in providing for them. Through Sure Start and other policies, Labour in office has a proud record of tackling childhood poverty, a record of progress that the Tories put into reverse. It will fall to Labour again to redouble our efforts to eradicate child poverty through the benefits of an economic strategy that restores the growth and prosperity we have lost over the past 13 years. Nor should we shy away from the active health interventions that can help protect children and adults alike. Nobody now calls Labour’s ban on smoking in public places ‘nanny statism’. We must have the courage to go further.

Nutrition education

Ten per cent of children are obese (not just overweight) before they start primary school. That rises to 20 per cent by the time they leave.²¹ There would be greater public acceptance of restrictions on the advertising of unhealthy food and drink, minimum unit pricing for alcohol and taxes on major sources of sodium and saturated fats if they were seen, not as ‘penalising’ unhealthy eating habits or punishing hard pressed families, but as directly promoting healthier living. Building on the success of the soft drinks industry levy, we should hypothecate taxes on excess sugar, salt and fats in processed foods and drinks, and ring-fence the proceeds for schools to provide nutritious meals and cookery and home economics classes. These classes should be both fun and educational, helping to establish good cooking and eating habits that could last a lifetime. Jamie Oliver was ahead of the game on this years ago, and recently launched the Good School Food Awards to celebrate those working in education to bring good food to our children. Healthy practices should be celebrated and rewarded.

Curriculum for life

Whilst there are some specific changes to be made to the curriculum in relation to nutritional education and physical literacy, there are also broader changes that could be made. Headteachers often remark that the school curriculum is becoming more and more narrow, and less and less suitable for what children need.²² We need a curriculum that reflects the needs of society. We need a curriculum that facilitates the development of children in terms of their physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing, as well as their academic attainment. In other words, we need a ‘Curriculum for Life’. After the constant meddling of the Tory years, schools should be empowered to design a curriculum that pupils, parents, teachers and governors can agree best prepares children for the world of today – and tomorrow – with the skills and resilience to better protect their physical and mental health as adults.

Currently, key components of a rounded, healthy curriculum are either missing or given too little emphasis, including physical and digital literacy, financial literacy, and an understanding of social and emotional wellbeing. As Professor Richard Layard has argued: “Education should develop more than the skills of earning a living. It should also develop the skills of living a rounded and satisfying life and of contributing to the wellbeing of others. So, life skills should become an explicit goal of every school.” Furthermore, teachers tell me they can find themselves as tied to their computers and the internet as their pupils and are too constrained by assessments and inspections to provide a rounded education including outdoor learning. We need to give teachers and everyone working in education the support, time

and capacity to take a more holistic approach to the education of our children – something they are keen to do. Labour’s Education Secretary should review the Ofsted inspection system to include an assessment of how a school’s lessons, activities and ethos promote health and wellbeing.

Positive mental health from an early age

There is now a widespread acceptance that the first thousand days of a child’s life are crucial. In the UK today, an estimated five children in every classroom have a mental health problem.²³ Looking after our youngest children and giving them the best possible start means also looking after the mental health of parents and siblings. As the Mental Health Foundation argues, we should ensure that all parents, regardless of their circumstances and background, are equipped with the skills and knowledge to raise a mentally healthy infant and protect their own mental health as a parent. As children get older, we know that adverse childhood experiences can lead to a substantially higher risk of poor wellbeing, mental ill health, and other negative outcomes during the rest of their lives. A holistic approach incorporating the education, health, welfare and other systems is needed to ensure both that negative experiences are minimised and that they are never made worse by the well-meaning but harmful impact of outside interventions.

Healthy, well-connected communities

Let's get physical: the crucial role of sport, exercise, and physical activity

Promoting physical activity is key to preventing ill-health, including mental health. In addition to its benefits to individuals, access to recreational sport, leisure and games makes a significant contribution to social cohesion and community development. While investment in elite sports is important, and the success of our best athletes can inspire participation at all levels, the sports budget should be re-evaluated to direct available resources to those sectors where the evidence shows it would do most to deliver increased activity rates, including among the least active sections of society and at grassroots level.

The sport and leisure sector – much of which falls in the voluntary sector – should be given the respect and credit it deserves. Every day thousands of volunteers up and down the country organise training sessions, matches and a whole plethora of activities in our communities which keep children and

young people active, and, in many cases, stop them from ending up in either the criminal justice system or on another NHS waiting list, desperate for mental health support. Pre-covid research from Sport England tells us that overall, community sport and physical activity drives more than £85bn in economic and social value.

We should also be protecting as many of our parks and green spaces as possible, as well as encouraging a greater integration of physical leisure services with healthcare services at a local level. Business rate reform could help encourage more affordable gyms and fitness centres on the high street, and we should look at cutting the level of VAT on physical activity services (it currently stands at 20 per cent, much higher than in, for instance, Ireland, where it is 9 per cent).

Building healthy homes and neighbourhoods

The Tories want to cut regulations over planning and housebuilding. Developers often make enormous profits from housing and commercial schemes that encroach on green spaces, put added pressure on an already overstretched transport network, and contribute to air, noise and light pollution. The planning system works in their favour, and the objections of local residents concerned for their environment, health and wellbeing are too often brushed aside. We do need more houses, but as the Town and Country Planning Association says: “Too many homes and neighbourhoods built today undermine residents’ health and wellbeing.”²⁴ There is no contradiction between providing more homes and ensuring they are good for the people who will live in them. The Healthy Homes Bill, promoted by the TCPA and supported by Lord Nigel Crisp, would enshrine legally binding ‘healthy homes principles’ into law. Labour in power should look at adopting it as government legislation and enact it as soon as possible.

Community decision making

Labour’s belief in ‘double devolution’ means trusting local communities not just with decision-making powers, but also the resources to improve their neighbourhoods. Local people know best what their communities need to improve the wellbeing of those who live and work there. Social wellbeing directly impacts physical and mental wellbeing and is too often overlooked. So as well as Community Right to Buy, Community Wealth Funds and Dormant Assets Funds, we should create ‘community chests’ available at town, village or ward level. The source of these funds should be a mixture of additional contributions from developers whose schemes reduce available green space or increase air noise and light pollution, and centrally allocated resources that ensure fair distribution across the country according to need. Community groups comprising residents, business owners, voluntary

organisations and others should be empowered to allocate money to services or facilities that enhance wellbeing, for example libraries, wellness centres, green spaces or active travel routes.

Active travel

Given its health and environmental benefits, active travel must become a core objective of transport policy. As important as public transport is, where possible, people should be able to combine getting where they want to go with physical activity. This means designing transport policy from a human perspective, with improving people's experience, and not just speed, as a priority. Ten per cent of the central transport budget could be ring-fenced for active travel, with a priority for more deprived areas. The national planning policy framework and the planning practice guidance should be reviewed to enable local planning authorities to reject applications that do not offer active travel opportunities or walkable neighbourhoods.

Speeding and dangerous parking is a wholly unacceptable wherever it occurs, but especially close to schools and colleges. Parents need to feel it is safe for their children to use public transport or, better still, walk or cycle to school. Twenty mph limits and more enforcement officers around schools would help, as would more creative ideas like partnerships with local supermarkets, businesses and others to provide temporary parking or 'kiss and go' drop-off zones. In some cases, charges could be made for suitable off-road parking, including by schools on their outdoor pitches with the proceeds going to create more safe travel routes.

Loneliness

As the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission revealed, the impact of loneliness on individuals, communities and the nation is profound. Studies have shown that lonely people are 26 per cent more likely to die than those with more social links and that long-term social isolation is as damaging as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.²⁵ The New Economics Foundation found that loneliness contributes to sickness absence and reduced productivity, costing UK employers around £2.5bn a year.²⁶ And loneliness can be a factor in higher staff turnover at a time when businesses are struggling to retain workers and fill jobs. The battle against loneliness is the clearest possible example of the need for a holistic approach to policy formulation. Health, education, transport, housing, planning, employment, culture and leisure policies can all make a dramatic difference to reducing loneliness and improving physical, mental and social wellbeing. We all have a part to play in making the UK a less lonely country, but government can help transform communities by, for example, protecting and creating welcoming built

environments with green spaces and safe, navigable walking routes that are accessible to people of all ages and all levels of physical ability.

The economics of wellbeing

Healthy workplaces

Many of us spend a large proportion of our lives at work. More and more employers now recognise the need to look after the health and wellbeing of their workforce. Tory peer Lord Rose, the Chairman of Asda, says this should now be a legal obligation.²⁷ The CBI recently announced a work health index to “support the economy-wide level of investment in health and wellbeing interventions.” Stress over job insecurity and zero hours contracts affects many, often poorly paid workers. Labour should consult with employers’ organisations and trade unions about how to spread best practice, including the provision of mental health advice, recreation facilities, and wellness breaks, and insist that these are followed by all companies who compete for government contracts.

Supporting healthy business investments

Employers increasingly want to look after their workforce better, not just in the interests of the employees themselves but also to benefit their own bottom line. While the very biggest companies are able and willing to make the necessary investments, smaller firms should be incentivised to play their part, including by supporting staff with caring responsibilities to work flexibly or take time off. The tax system provides incentives for environmental investments. It should prioritise investment in health and wellbeing in a similar way.

Helping women stay economically active

The holistic approach I am proposing would address the health and wellbeing policies needed to improve the lives of everybody, but inevitably some sections of society require specific attention. Looking after women’s health at all ages is vital. As well as flexible working and improved and affordable childcare options, it is clear that proper interventions to support women through their mid-life and mid-career can boost the economy and save the NHS significant sums of money. It is estimated that one in 10 women have left work because of menopause symptoms; many more have cut down on their hours or chosen not to apply for promotion.²⁸ Employers should be training staff, sharing information better, and putting in place

menopause absence policies. The government has been dragging its feet since setting up the menopause task force. A Labour government should give the issue the attention it deserves and put in place a cross-departmental menopause strategy as an early priority.

Prevention and early intervention

Gambling and addiction

There are an estimated 400 gambling-related suicides a year. And with addicts increasingly turning to A&E for help, doctors say the NHS is picking up the tab for the online betting industry.²⁹ Addiction ruins countless lives and adversely impacts physical and mental health and personal and family incomes. While the proposed reforms to the gambling laws are welcome and long overdue, I believe we should go further. There should be severe restrictions on online stakes and prize money, controls on TV and other advertising and a levy on those who profit most from exposing people to such harm. The proceeds should go towards positive programmes including gambling recovery services, grassroots sports, and ‘curriculum for life’ classes in schools and colleges to improve young people’s digital education and financial management skills. We should also look to support evidence-based interventions for substance abuse which can save society money in medical costs and help individuals remain productive members of society.³⁰

Social prescribing

As the Kings Fund tell us: “There is a growing body of evidence that social prescribing can lead to a range of positive health and wellbeing outcomes. Studies have pointed to improvements in quality of life and emotional wellbeing, mental and general wellbeing, and levels of depression and anxiety.” Better and more widespread early intervention with social prescribing could significantly reduce the number of drugs we need to prescribe, but it is concerning that Britain has followed other countries into a culture of over-prescribing of medication and what’s known as ‘polypharmacy’, where multiple medicines are offered to a single patient. More than a billion items are dispensed by the NHS every year. The Chief Pharmaceutical Officer argues that while medicines should never be taken away from people where they are effective, they can also cause harm and be wasteful.³¹ The evidence suggests overprescribing can disproportionately affect black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and the most vulnerable including the elderly and disabled. The government has been reluctant to set a target for the reduction of overprescribing under the NHS

Long Term Plan. Labour should do so, starting with a realistic ambition of cutting the prescribing budget by 10 per cent, rising to 15 to 20 per cent to help fund more social prescribing and mental health provision.

Wellbeing later in life

An ageing population, with people staying healthier for longer, requires policies to help protect the physical and mental wellbeing of older citizens and guard against loneliness and isolation. Age UK's index of wellbeing in later life highlights the importance of maintaining meaningful connections through social, creative or physical activity. When departments are assessing the impact of their policies, they should all ensure that, as far as possible, all programmes, initiatives and capital investment projects are equally accessible to older people who may be less mobile or have physical impairments to contend with. Too often, the cuts that local authorities are forced to make because of financial pressures, such as pavement repairs or the closure of libraries and leisure facilities, disadvantage older people disproportionately.³²

We also need a more comprehensive system of regular health checks from middle age onwards, including hearing assessments, without which, as the Royal National Institute for the Deaf tells us, people can suffer from a lack of independence and social isolation.³³

CONCLUSION

Creating the conditions for good physical, mental and social health and wellbeing are not just responsibilities for government. What is required is a massive collaborative effort that includes parents, health care professionals, teachers, employers, trade unions, local government, charities, voluntary organisations, businesses and many others. We all have a role to play and a responsibility to do our bit.

Local authorities across the UK have often been well ahead of central government in putting in place innovative and effective strategies. Both the trade unions and employers' organisations are committed to support initiatives across the economy. Charities and voluntary organisations work individually and collaboratively to make a difference in their own fields. We have an education sector working day in and day out to improve the lives of our children and young people. The sports and leisure industry wants to play its part. It is for government to harness all this energy, imagination and power into a cohesive national strategy that can rapidly and sustainably transform millions of lives.

I believe that, by adopting a comprehensive strategy towards improving the health and wellbeing of the country and its citizens, Labour can offer a fresh and positive vision for Britain's future. A future where not every problem is answered simply by throwing more money at it; where prevention and early intervention take priority; and where investing time, energy and resources in people's health and wellbeing helps them as individuals, supports families, communities and businesses, and helps us all become more prosperous, more productive and happier.

The Tories will not do it. Labour has an opportunity to seize the initiative. Now is the time to do so.

Endnotes

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