

# Put Kids First!

Standing up for Scotland's  
next generation

**manifesto**

Scotland has made good strides in tackling poor mental health and illness. But the warning signs are clear: post-pandemic, we risk a lost generation, consigned to poor mental health, high unemployment and economic inactivity. The costs of inaction are too high. **The time to act is now.**

This election, Change Mental Health asks Scotland's politicians to sign our '*Put Kids First*' pledge to protect the mental health of our young people - now and in the future.

**At Change Mental Health, we work with people whose distress has become severe, enduring and, in many cases, long-standing.**

We support adults living with complex mental illness. We stand alongside people who hear voices and those living with psychosis and schizophrenia. We work with veterans affected by trauma, men who have struggled in silence, carers carrying immense responsibility, and families in rural and island communities where support can feel distant.

Across these experiences, a common theme often emerges. For many, the first signs of difficulty appeared early in life with anxiety dismissed as a phase, bullying unaddressed, trauma misunderstood, or a young person who did not meet the threshold for help and therefore received none.

Mental illness cannot always be prevented, but earlier recognition and timely support can reduce suffering, prevent escalation and alter life trajectories. We are now watching a generation grow up after unprecedented disruption and for many, trauma. The pandemic interrupted education, relationships and routine during critical developmental years. Many young people returned to school carrying anxiety, loss and uncertainty.

Since then, they have navigated an increasingly pressured and digitally saturated world. Schools are reporting rising distress. Absence linked to anxiety is growing. More young people are disengaging from education and struggling to move into employment. Increasing numbers of young adults are relying on disability support because their mental health has not stabilised.

These patterns are not inevitable. They reflect systems that intervene too late.

If we allow early distress to become entrenched illness, the human and economic costs will shape Scotland for decades to come. Safeguarding our young people is a long-term national investment. By protecting childhood, strengthening school environments and investing in early community support, we can reduce avoidable suffering and build resilience that lasts into adulthood.

Our manifesto sets out the general principles and practical steps we believe will stand up for Scotland's young people and reduce avoidable mental health suffering in the years ahead. Together we can prevent a lost generation, who expect decisionmakers and politicians to meet the moment.

Will Scotland's politicians sign the pledge to Put Kids First?

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Nick Ward  
CEO  
Change Mental Health

**1 Protect childhood:  
Ban social media for under 16's**

After waiting decades to respond to tobacco and alcohol harms, Governments cannot afford to delay a coordinated response to the public health crisis of our time. Digital platforms now maximise engagement and increasingly shape young people's development. Evidence links heavy and nighttime use to poor sleep, anxiety, depression, cyberbullying and harmful comparison. Under-16s remain neurologically vulnerable and need enforceable age protections. Safeguarding children's mental wellbeing should be an urgent public health priority, requiring coordinated action from the Scottish and UK Governments to implement a ban.

**2 Stop the distractions:  
Ban mobile phones during  
the school day**

Consistent national requirements restricting mobile phone use during the school day would help reduce distraction, limit exposure to online harms and create calmer learning spaces. Current guidance allows for headteacher discretion; yet we believe this issue cuts to the heart of society's worsening relationship with technology and social media. We call for a compulsory mobile phone ban in Scotland's schools.

**5 Build hope: A job, training or  
educational place for every  
young person through a Young  
Person's Guarantee programme**

Every 16-24-year-old in Scotland should have access to work, training, education or meaningful roles when needed, as the transition to adulthood is critical for long-term wellbeing. Disengagement from work or learning is linked to poorer mental health, financial insecurity and inequality. A properly resourced national programme must prioritise those facing the greatest barriers, with coordinated wraparound support to sustain participation. Guaranteeing opportunity is both an economic and public health priority, providing purpose, stability and hope at a formative stage of life.

**3 Give schools the  
tools: Mandatory  
mental health training  
for all school staff**

School staff are often the first adults to notice changes in behaviour or mood. Every teacher and member of support staff should have the skills to recognise early signs of distress and respond appropriately. Mandatory, high-quality mental health training for all school staff would enable earlier identification, reduce stigma and ensure young people are signposted to the right support at the right time.

**4 Enhance  
support for all:  
Ringfence funding  
for preventative  
community mental  
health services**

Early community intervention prevents costly crisis care. Funding for preventative mental health services must be protected and ringfenced to ensure accessible local support based on need, reducing long-term pressure on health, social care and social security systems.



**You can also sign the  
pledge to Put Kids First.**

Get involved and make your voice heard:  
[www.changemh.org/manifesto](http://www.changemh.org/manifesto)

A large, stylized illustration of a yellow document with a pink pencil pointing to it. The document is slightly offset to the right, showing a stack of papers. The pencil is pink with a red eraser and a blue band. A dark blue ink smudge is visible at the bottom of the document. The text on the document is centered and reads:

**Will Scotland's  
politicians sign  
Change Mental  
Health's pledge to  
Put Kids First?**

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