Westminster Hall debate on improving support for mental health

NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. We help those NHS foundation trusts and trusts to deliver high-quality, patient-focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate.

NHS Providers has all trusts in England in voluntary membership, collectively accounting for £124bn of annual expenditure and employing 1.5 million people.

Please contact publicaffairs@nhsproviders.org if you would like any further information.

Key points

- More individuals are accessing mental health care and treatment than ever before thanks to new services and higher levels of investment. Trusts continue to work hard to expand services and provide the best care with the staff and resources available.
- There is significant unmet need and a number of challenges facing mental health trusts which impact on their ability to deliver high quality, accessible mental health care consistently. Demand for mental health services is continuing to rise at a time when the sector is facing substantial financial and capacity pressures.
- Trust leaders have stressed the need to shift resources towards prevention and early intervention. This will enable them to deliver a more proactive and co-ordinated community-based model of mental health care, and help prevent individuals becoming unwell and enable early access to support for those that do. Building an appropriate bed base and a safe therapeutic environment is also key to delivering timely, high-quality care.
- Achieving this depends on sustainable levels of support and investment continuing over the long term, with a firm focus on the enablers of expansion and transformation – data and digital, workforce and capital funding. Current plans need to go much further. The government must support mental health services in forthcoming NHS funding decisions to ensure trusts can meet rising demand through new and future models of care, and in recognition of the economic benefit derived from investing in the delivery of high quality, accessible mental health services.

- There needs to be particular focus on some of the most vulnerable and under-served groups in our society, such as children and young people, people from Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities and people with a learning disability and autistic people.

Context

Welcome strides have been made to challenge the stigma of mental ill health, increase awareness of the need to improve care and begin to tackle the lack of equity in terms of treatment and access to mental health services. More individuals are accessing mental health care and treatment thanks to new services and higher levels of investment. Latest national data shows there were 1.95 million people in contact with mental health services in July, which is the highest number on record. The number of individuals' 'care contacts' with services is up by 11.7% compared to a year ago and 40.4% higher than pre-pandemic levels (July 2019).

While trusts are doing all they can to expand services and provide the best possible care with the staff and resources available, demand for mental health care has significantly increased and outpaced welcome increases in capacity. Latest national data shows mental health referrals are up by 9.7% compared to a year ago and 35.3% higher than pre-pandemic levels (July 2019). There were 1.67 million adults and 505,451 children on the mental health waiting list – which is up 19.9% and 89% respectively compared to the same period before the pandemic. There are also 344,919 children and young people and 234,033 adults waiting for treatment from community mental health services. In our October 2023 survey of mental health trust leaders, more than 9 out of 10 were worried about whether their trust had the capacity to meet demand for services over the next 12 months.

How trusts are improving support for mental health

There are a range of steps trusts have been taking, working with local partners, to meet the needs of as many individuals in their local areas and try to overcome the demand/capacity mismatch. Trusts are, for example:
- setting up day services to provide an alternative to admission to hospital;
- using digital solutions to expand access to care where appropriate;
- working with schools, GPs and their partners in local authorities and the voluntary sector, to deliver services that better meet individuals' needs who have reached a crisis point, or at an earlier stage to help avoid them reaching a crisis point altogether;
- working with other trusts and the independent sector to expand the availability of inpatient beds to help deliver care closer to home and have fewer people wait in general hospital beds or in the community;

- providing more intensive holistic support earlier to individuals to help better meet growing demand for adult community mental health services.

Mental health trusts are also involved in work to support prevention of mental ill health. Some examples include:

- a system-wide programme focused on prevention, early intervention and integration;
- 'South London Listens' and South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust's work focused on the organisation as a community asset; and
- plans to create a mental health centre in South London looking at root causes of mental health issues and long-term solutions.

The previous development of national fully costed programmes for mental health service delivery have been substantial, welcome steps forward to help begin tackling the lack of equity in terms of treatment of, and access to, mental health services.

What more is needed to improve support

Current plans need to go much further if we are to meet rising demand for mental health services, address mental health care backlogs and consistently deliver high quality care. It is vital to:

- build an appropriate bed base and a safe, therapeutic environment;
- increase community-based provision; and
- invest in the mental health workforce.

Resources need to be shifted towards prevention and early intervention to deliver a more proactive, co-ordinated and multi-agency, community-based model of mental health care. Achieving this depends on sustainable levels of support and investment over the long term in key areas that enable expansion and transformation: capital funding, workforce, and data and digital.

Capital funding

Mental health services are being delivered in some of the oldest parts of the NHS estate and, in many instances, the sector has lacked the investment in modernisation and development available to other parts of the NHS despite best practice for mental health care having progressed significantly in recent years. Mental health trust leaders have highlighted how poor physical environments uniquely affects the rehabilitation and recovery of people using mental health services, given they are often accessing services at their most vulnerable and typically stay for longer than patients in other types of services. Having a high-quality physical environment is also important for staff morale and patient safety: large

wards create a cramped and noisy environment and impact on staff's ability to support patients safely.

The government must take urgent action to ensure all trusts have access to sufficient capital funding to halt the deterioration of their estate, eradicate the maintenance backlog and provide high-quality care in environments fit for the 21st century.

Workforce

Despite growth in the mental health workforce in recent years, there remain significant shortfalls in both the number and skill mix of staff. The number of mental health nurses has only recently (2023-24) returned to 2009-10 levels. Six in 10 trust leaders (60%) are worried about whether their trust has the right numbers, quality and mix of staff to deliver high quality health care. Effective mental health services depend on multi-disciplinary teams with the right levels of expertise, skills and experience to meet individuals' care and treatment needs. Focus is also needed on retention and making the NHS a great place to work, alongside ensuring compassionate, courageous and inclusive leadership at all levels.

Data and digital

There is a need for better data collection and quality to ensure a clear understanding of mental health activity, access and outcomes, and in turn enable better commissioning of services. The scale of unmet need for mental health services is still not fully understood; prevalence data for mental ill health among adults in England is from 2014. Investment in the skills required to analyse and act on population-based trends is also needed. The digital fundamentals also need to be in place for trusts, for example, strong digital infrastructure (e.g. reliable wi-fi) and effective electronic patient record systems and shared care records to help staff deliver safer care, improve patient and staff experience and enable data-driven decision making.

Vulnerable and under-served groups

People with a learning disability and autistic people have faced longstanding, structural inequities, with many not receiving the care and support they need and should expect from the health and care system. Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities experience significant inequalities in access, experience and outcomes from mental health services; black individuals continue to be more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act and receive more restrictive care in the community than other groups. Trust leaders are also clear that support for children and young people must be a priority to meet needs now and prevent a mental health epidemic in future years. Nearly all

respondents (90%) to our survey earlier this year said that the health and wellbeing of children is not considered enough in national policy and only 33% were satisfied that local plans adequately prioritise these services.

Wider public services

Increased support for wider public services, in particular public health and social care, is crucial given the contribution they make in helping to both prevent mental ill health and avoid deterioration. Trusts and their partners add the most value when working collaboratively with an appropriately funded public health service, and accompanying government focus on addressing the wider determinants of health. The impact on physical and mental health should be properly considered in the development and implementation of all government policies. In social care, there remains a need for a clear vision of reform, and tangible, fully funded measures to improve access and quality for all ages.