

National Voices' response to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Discussion Paper

About us

National Voices is the leading coalition of health and social care charities in England. We have almost 200 members covering a diverse range of health conditions and communities, connecting us with the experiences of millions of people. We work together to strengthen the voice of patients, service users, carers, their families, and the voluntary organisations that work for them.

Our Response

National Voices welcomes the opportunity to input into the proposed 10-year mental health and wellbeing plan. Our submission draws on the expertise and insight of our members, as well as our report [Ask How I Am](#), which was coproduced by National Voices and the Centre for Mental Health, with support from a range of long-term conditions charities.

We welcome the intention to create a new long-term plan for mental health and the emphasis within the consultation documentation on preventing mental ill-health and promoting mental wellbeing, alongside work to improve the quality of, and access to, treatment and crisis support.

Although strides have been made in raising awareness of mental health issues in recent years there remain significant gaps in the support available, and these are particularly pronounced for people from marginalised communities. The commitment to prioritising work to address inequalities in mental health, set out in the discussion paper, is therefore welcome.

As the discussion paper rightly acknowledges there are clear links between mental and physical health – with people who experience mental health conditions more likely to have poor physical health and people who have physical health conditions more likely to experience mental ill health. There is still much to do to bring together services to support our mental and physical health, given these inextricable links and the clear opportunities that currently exist with the integration agenda.

National Voices' recent report [Ask How I Am](#) explored what could be done to improve emotional and psychological support for people with physical health conditions. We set out a series of recommendations including

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improving training around mental health among those working with people with long term conditions; improving the mental health support available in primary care services; reviewing restrictions on IAPT that make it less suitable for people with long-term conditions and ensuring Integrated Care Systems have clear responsibilities around mental health. We would like to see these recommendations taken forward as part of the 10-year plan.

In our discussions with members around this submission, we heard concern that mental health support for people with long-term conditions had become even more difficult to access since the onset of the pandemic. And yet the need for mental health support is growing - for example a [survey](#) by our member the Neurological Alliance showed mental health and wellbeing among people with neurological conditions significantly worsened during the pandemic and yet over half of people surveyed hadn't been asked about their mental health by a GP. The ongoing failure to join up mental and physical health services leaves people forced to navigate two entirely separate systems, at significant personal cost in terms of time and stress.

We therefore welcome the commitment to ensuring that the new Mental Health 10 Year Plan aligns with the NHS Long Term plan and the government's other strategies, including those around addressing health inequalities. This is vital – but strategic alignment must also translate to practical integration of support from the perspective of the individual.

Members told us that early priorities should include bringing mental health professionals into multi-disciplinary teams supporting people with long-term conditions and / or building mental health support into long-term condition care pathways; and recognising the point of diagnosis with a long-term condition as an opportunity for intervention to provide mental health support.

Members emphasised that these approaches are important *whatever* the long-term condition people live with, and that it would not be helpful to prioritise mental health support only for those with a limited set of conditions.

Similarly members highlighted the need to recognise that long-term conditions do not only impact those directly affected. Carers of people with long-term conditions, many of whom have been forced to take on additional responsibility with less support during the pandemic, also need better access to mental health support.

We know that the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector already plays a critical role in supporting people with long-term conditions around their mental health and wellbeing. However there is still work to be done to improve clinicians understanding of and confidence in VCSE sector provision, and to ensure that VCSE organisations are involved in planning services as an equal partner.

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To fully harness the power of the voluntary and community sector to improve mental health and wellbeing requires investment in a healthy eco system of community based support – peer support, in-reach, out-reach, multi-disciplinary hubs, advocacy – anything that creates trust, purpose, connection is a good thing.

It will also be important to ensure that the pathways and structures we build around people with a physical health condition include specialist and complex mental health support – the mental health needs of people with physical conditions cannot simply be contained within the “wellbeing” space.

As well as exacerbating access issues and the increasing burden of mental ill-health among people with long-term conditions generally, our members highlight a number of other key impacts of Covid that need to be considered in developing the Mental Health 10-Year Plan. The first is the significant burden of Long Covid and the need for emotional and psychological support for those who experience it, many of whom have experienced additional trauma as a result of their condition not being taken seriously and their struggles in accessing the system. Improving the integration of support is therefore critical. The second is the burden of grief and the impact of bereavement during the pandemic – with significant additional demand for bereavement support being identified by members.

Alongside work to address the mental health issues experienced by people with long-term physical health conditions, we also need action to improve mental health services more generally, including crisis support and treatment services. In many areas there are significant gaps between demand and capacity to support people experiencing mental health issues.

Our members told us that where the NHS Community Mental Health Framework is already being rolled out there are some very positive examples of practice emerging – for example the creation of Somerset Open Mental Health through collaboration between people and communities, the VCSE sector and a range of statutory services. However, this approach needs to be replicated in other communities.

While supporting mental health needs to remain a core responsibility for the NHS, we welcome the fact that the proposed Mental Health 10-Year Plan will be a cross-governmental plan, and the recognition of the wide range of other factors that underlie and can exacerbate mental ill-health. We believe that the cross-governmental response should encompass robust action to address issues such as poor housing, lack of employment support, and challenges in accessing benefits and entitlements – all of which we know contribute significantly to mental ill-health. We hope that the Mental Health 10-Year Plan will include specific commitments around these issues.

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We also know that these issues are even more pronounced for people from marginalised groups. If the Government wants to Level Up, it will need to invest particularly in additional support around the social determinants of health *and* in support for mental health and wellbeing in the communities that experience the greatest health inequalities.

While we welcome and share the ambitions set out in the discussion document for the 10-year plan, we are concerned that we have not yet heard a clear commitment to additional resourcing to support these ambitions. None of the aspirations that are set out in the plan will be delivered without addressing two key issues:

- The overall level of resource available to support mental health and wellbeing, and the weighting of resources towards communities that experience the greatest health inequalities
- A plan for addressing gaps in the workforce across sectors

We recognise that alongside plans for the Mental Health 10-Year Plan the Government is also developing plans around workforce and addressing health inequalities. These are vital. As noted above it is not just shortages within the mental health workforce that have a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing, but also the wider capacity gaps in health and social care which mean that people are waiting longer in pain and discomfort, and face more challenges navigating the system. We are therefore calling for a clear resourcing and workforce plan to be published alongside the 10-Year Plan, setting out clearly how it will be delivered, and in particular, how the aspirations around addressing inequalities will be resourced.

Last but certainly not least, we welcome the focus within the discussion paper on the perspectives of the Lived Experience Advisory Network at NHS England and the ambition to root the plan in the voices and perspectives of people who live with a mental health condition. We believe that people with lived experience need to be involved at all levels in redesigning systems to better meet their needs. We believe that a commitment to coproducing new approaches with people with lived experience of mental health issues will be critical.

The Government's aspirations to prevent mental ill-health, promote mental wellbeing and to improve access to high quality support and treatment require ambitious action and the courage to take new approaches. We stand ready to work with you to help this to happen.