

With one-in-four of us expected to experience a mental health problem each year, **Keith Fernett** asks why it's still the poor relation in terms of attention and funding

We need **action** on mental health services

A STAGGERING ONE in four of us will experience some kind of mental health problem each year.

Though this is a headline grabbing figure, mental health continues to be the poor relation to physical health in the UK. A report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists found that only 24 per cent of adults with common mental health problems will receive treatment, compared to 94 per cent of people with diabetes. Mental health also falls behind in terms of funding too, receives just 13 per cent of NHS funding.

Baroness Hollins, chairman of British Medical Association (BMA) Board of Science, has spoken out about the unequal footing of physical and mental health. She has called out the acceptance in society, and even the medical profession, that people with mental health problems and intellectual disability will live shorter lives and will suffer because of unmet health needs. "In the vast majority of cases, there is no good reason for this. But the voice of these vulnerable groups often goes unheard, and the status quo remains unchallenged."

Common mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, panic disorders, phobias and obsessive compulsive disorder can cause great emotional distress, and can affect how you cope with day-to-day life and your ability to work, so it is important for those experiencing them to seek help.

I am the chief executive of Caritas Anchor House, a Catholic social action

charity which offers a home and support to more than 230 homeless people and records more than 15,000 visits to our services by community members each year. In my role, I have seen an increased complexity in the homeless referrals we receive for access to our services, and in 2015, 52 per cent of our resident group had mental health needs.

Mental illness is treatable and, with appropriate support and treatment, people do recover. Many move on with their lives and are able to care for their family, contribute to the local community, and get back into employment or training. However, access to services can be difficult and sometimes impossible for some of those who require them.

I acknowledge that treatment for a mental health issue may not always be a straightforward journey. For many, mental health is not a standalone issue. Individuals may also experience drug and alcohol addiction, domestic abuse, offending histories, lack of employment and education or physical health needs. Indeed, 51 per cent of the residents of Caritas Anchor House have multiples of these areas of need.

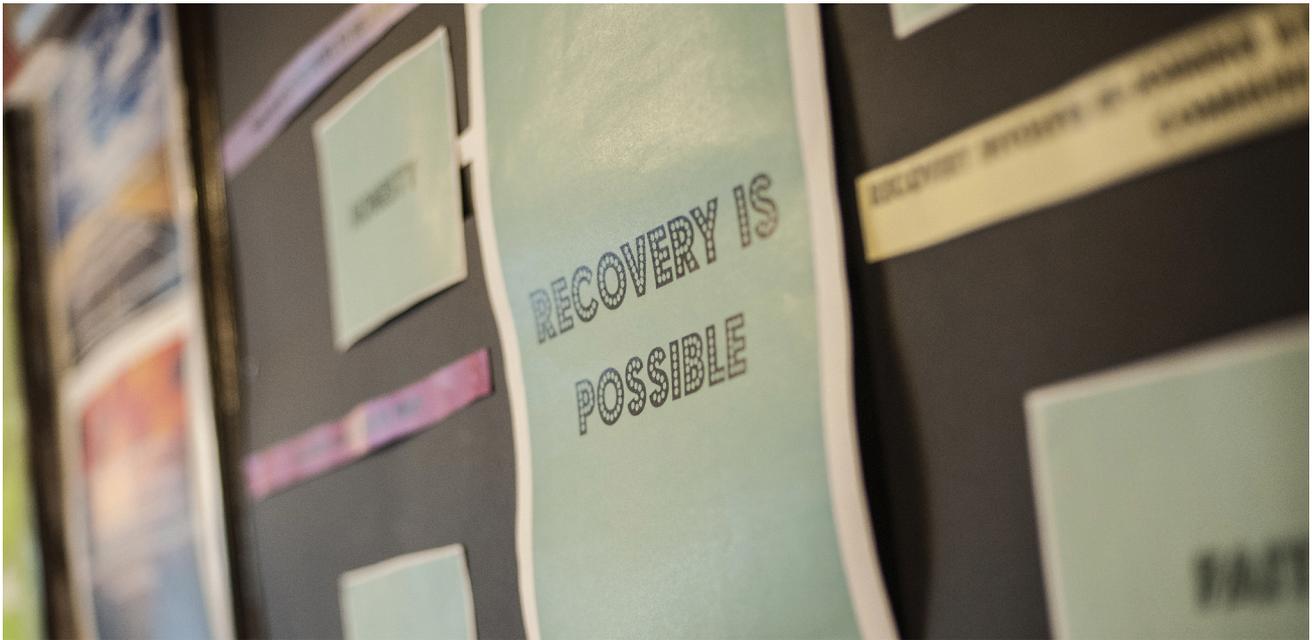
We have seen service users with multiple needs, for example addiction and mental health issues, to be denied access to services when they need them most. We have had individuals not able to access either mental health or drug and alcohol services, until the other issue had been dealt with. This creates a vicious circle, where their mental health deteriorates due to their substance use and vice versa.

Unfortunately these challenges are not isolated. On a number of occasions we have had to lock down our facility because of an individual who threatened violence as a result of mental health

issues. We provided accommodation to an individual on his release from prison, but services failed to disclose that he had set his prison cell on fire, and had been banned from accessing the community mental health team, the probation service as well as other services. He proved to be a danger to himself, the staff and the 118 other residents living at Caritas Anchor House. If he had been able to engage with mental health services, the individual could have been supported but instead has been recalled to prison. It seems inevitable that on his release he will face the same outcome.

I appreciate that resources are limited, but mental health services are not facing this alone. Homeless organisations like Caritas Anchor House are finding their resources stretched, while demand is ever-increasing. We are working in a very tough economic climate and the London Borough of Newham, where Caritas Anchor House is based, has had to deal with £84million of government cuts over the past four years. We are currently running at a 99 per cent occupancy rate, and unfortunately do not have the resources, in either time or money, to support people with such a complexity of needs, when our role is not understood by mental health services.

Our approach is to act as a community resilience centre, providing services to those in need and thus reducing demand on mental health services and the NHS. Our community-based therapeutic service, Your Space, aims to build active networks of emotional support in our community. This service provides isolated local residents with a safe and supportive place to meet, develop confidence, share problems and improve their sense of wellbeing. We also hold mutual aid meetings, Alcoholics and Cocaine



Anonymous, which sees 6,000 visits each year.

Because of the complexity of mental health, it is important that our voice is heard by health services and the Government, so that the problems we and other organisations have experienced can be addressed for the benefit of everyone.

While we are all under pressure, we have to be open and honest about what those pressures are, and put our priorities in the direction of those individuals who have serious mental health needs, and are in need of support from professionals, which is not always forthcoming in an appropriate manner.

A survey by the Care Quality Commission found that one in five people do not feel they have seen staff from the mental health services often enough to meet their needs, whilst 23 per cent have not been told who is in charge of their care. A further 26 per cent had not had a formal meeting to discuss how their care was working in the last year. These worrying statistics led Dr Paul Lelliott, deputy chief inspector of hospitals, to say: "It is clear that many people do not feel well-served by community mental health services. Leaders and staff from mental health trusts should reflect on what they could do differently and better to ensure people are engaged effectively and involved in their care and take action to ensure that people get the help and support they need."

Mental health is a very real and serious issue which has been overlooked for too long. We need action on mental health and fully-funded, engaged services that can support people. David Cameron's recent announcement of £1 billion investment in mental health services is interesting, but to see positive changes, mental health professionals must consider different approaches and attitudes to service delivery.

I would ask therefore for a re-evaluation and re-prioritising for mental health services, particularly for those who have other complex needs associated with them – different organisations need to have a more cohesive approach to supporting people with multiple needs. This re-evaluation has been called for in many different ways in the past year, and I believe it would be very helpful for Clinical Commissioning Groups, the NHS and mental health services to consider this, particularly when you see the amount of resource that have been taken up by other agencies supporting these individuals, or in effect, being wasted.

I have seen some very positive examples of organisations working with those who have mental health needs, which has been seen to reduce calls upon other mental health services. The Newham and Tower Hamlets branch of Mind work in partnership with Caritas Anchor House, and in 2015 were named as our Community Partner of the Year in our annual awards ceremony.

The specialist benefits service Mind provides has been outstanding and they have helped advocate for so many of our

- Self-harm statistics for the UK show one of the highest rates in Europe: 400 per 100,000
- More than 70 per cent of the prison population has two or more mental health disorders
- Demand for mental health services has risen by 20 per cent over the last five years
- Mental health counts for almost a quarter (23 per cent) of disease burden in the UK
- Mental health beds have been reduced by eight per cent since 2010
- David Cameron has recently announced £1 billion in investment in mental health services

residents to ensure they get the benefits they need and are entitled to, in turn reducing financial worries and anxieties.

We also work with the Metropolitan Police and I have been impressed with how they work with people who have mental health needs. Though they are not trained mental health specialists, I have seen an empathy and understanding from them when they help people who are experiencing mental health difficulties. I believe this is a glimpse of what the future could look like – different organisations working together for those who have mental health needs, with a client-centric approach and with full support from mental health services.

Mental health is a ticking time bomb, and with serious mental illnesses reducing life expectancy by up to 20 years, the time to act is now. **JM**