

Mental health and wellbeing plan: discussion paper and call for evidence

Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health and Social Care's Mental health and wellbeing plan: discussion paper and call for evidence. Our key role is to make sure that patients, the public, service users, and carers (PPSuC) are at the heart of service improvement in health and social care. In line with our role, we have focused our comments on:

- Patient and Public Involvement and engagement
- What needs of Birmingham residents are

Healthwatch Birmingham notes that the opportunity to respond has been available since April. We are pleased that this has given patients and the public a long time to consider their views to respond. We also note that a quick read and easy read version of the discussion paper has been made available, however we would have welcomed the paper being available in community languages. We are pleased a postal address has been made available for those without digital access to respond but would have welcomed further contact details being clearly available if people needed to respond in other formats.

Prevention

Healthwatch Birmingham found that during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, many people told us they needed greater emotional support to deal with the uncertainty and isolation they felt. Our report into the second national lockdown found: "The pandemic will have a lasting effect on the mental health of many people in Birmingham and Solihull. People who have been emotionally affected by the lockdown restrictions and the continuing negative effects on the economy need to be able to access mental health support."

Healthwatch Birmingham feel that the emotional impact of such national events should be thought through, and that greater support is offered and utilised to prevent people's mental health worsening during times of great stress.

We have also found that due to the pressures GP practices are under, patients often feel they cannot discuss problems with their GP. *"I do not think the service that I get is sensitive to my needs, or timely. A lot of the time the GP is very rushed; before I even sit down and start talking, before I even finish my sentence, she is already finishing my sentence and giving me a prescription. She will be like, 'Yes I have given you this prescription' and I'm like 'No, I haven't even finished telling you what's wrong with me'."* This prevents the public discussing matters with their GP before they get worse.



Treatment

Healthwatch Birmingham has just reported on GP access. Many patients in Birmingham have found difficulty accessing their GP has had a big impact on their ability to manage their mental health.

"I have called in excess of 200 times over the past month and emailed multiple times. I am extremely unwell and have been unable to speak to anyone. Their phone systems do not work and by email they redirect me back to the phone. I am at the end of my tether with it and am feeling quite suicidal and am getting no help."

"The caller had a text asking her to make an appointment after a recent blood test last month. She has tried calling since (including on three different mobiles at the same time) but has been unable to get an appointment. She has even sent a letter to the practice in person asking for an appointment and got nothing. She really needs an appointment to find out what's wrong. She's very distressed by it."

We have also heard delays following a referral from their GP to a mental health service. People contact us, as they don't know who to contact during this time, and where they can get help if their situation worsens.

"Three months after a referral for a psychological assessment, I am still waiting for an appointment. The system cannot cope with the demand."

"There isn't much support for mental health especially for the over 18s. No counselling at all on the NHS at the moment. Months of waiting for a good private therapist."

"Over 6 months ago I made a self referral but have heard nothing"

In our report on Children and Young People's (CYP) mental health in Birmingham we found that waiting times for mental health treatment to begin, is an important issue for CYP and their parents/carers: many providers are failing to meet the government's four week target for starting treatment. As a national average, CYP are waiting two months to start their treatment. Forward Thinking Birmingham (the mental health provider for people 0-25 in Birmingham) has been identified as one of the providers with the longest median waiting times for treatment, at 112 days. The waiting times for treatment that respondents reported to us varied, with 16% receiving treatment within one month, 21% waiting longer than two months and 15% longer than 12 months.

This had a great impact on CYP and their families

"I have lost all faith in receiving support. I have taken it upon myself to research and support my child and have worked tirelessly for over two months on improving his



mental well-being. This has impacted on my whole family and I have had to be signed off work with stress."

"It was an emergency referral, but it still took over 6 months."

"My 16-year-old daughter self-referred online for anxiety affecting her daily life, insomnia, recurring thoughts and specific phobias. Months later someone phoned her during her GCSE exam period and asked her to talk. She panicked and cut off the call. They sent a letter saying she had declined services... Really unhelpful. She needed an in-person appointment. She hasn't got any better, but won't try again."

"We had to chase the second referral made by the GP only to be told that they had discharged us as we had not responded to their texts, which was not correct."

We also found that CYP reported issues to us of appointments being cancelled at short notice, unsatisfactory check-ups, too much focus on medication and not acknowledging the parent/carers views on how the child and young person was.

Many services are now provided virtually in Birmingham. The digital divide that exists among socio-economic classes in Birmingham should be taken to account. People from lower socio-economic status often have reduced accessibility to digital technologies. In addition, due to lower household income, people from lower socio-economic status are likely not to have broadband, own a computer or smart phone or indeed afford credit for internet use on their phones.

Crisis

Our report into Children and Young People's mental health services in Birmingham, found several concerns about crisis support. These included slow responses, long delays, lack of understanding and empathy, and a failure to offer support.

"I was in a very dark place, rang up and was pretty much told I had two options of either going into hospital or ringing another phone number. In that time I could have given up and killed myself. I was struggling and had my dad not been there, I likely would have ended my life. A crisis team should be there to stop that. Not make someone feel like giving up even more."

"I found the responses [from the crisis team] ranging from not helpful, to actually having a negative effect. On one occasion, the caller kept remarking that she didn't really know what to say as she did not normally hear about children of my child's age with these issues. She said that the parenting course that I was due to attend in a few weeks may help, but she did not know what the course would advise as she had never completed it herself. This made me feel worse and I ended the call. On another occasion... I was reminded that it was not an emergency service and... if I was worried to call 999... I have been waiting for over two months since my initial request for support. I felt utterly let down. I did not receive any advice or support from anyone in the crisis team. Not even any reassuring words."



"When we have had to ring the crisis team for support, we have felt very disillusioned and have not received the support we were looking for. We feel totally disappointed with mental health services... There is no treatment available to access immediately as the waiting list is incredibly long. We had to pay privately to access a psychologist."

"Find it difficult to get through on emergency number. Told during a crisis someone is coming out today but no one comes, leaving me and my daughter in an unpredictable and maybe dangerous situation for another night until I can call up. No point calling at night as I was told someone would be out the next day."

"Out of hours and weekend emergency care needs to be face to face for our autistic kids. Phone lines don't work. A&E is now not an option. We need face-to-face crisis support."

Healthwatch Birmingham welcome the focus on mental health. We have found during April 2021- March 2022 we had over six months where we did not receive a single piece of feedback from patients and the public that was positive about mental health services in Birmingham. This is extremely concerning, and we welcome any improvements that can be made.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kalebe".

Chipiliro Kalebe-Nyamongo
Research and Policy Manager

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah".

Sarah Walmsley
Data and Insight Officer

