

# PARLIAMENT STREET

*partnership in policy*

## **The UK Can Prevent Post Covid-19 Mental Health Epidemic if we Act Now**

**By Danny Bowman, Head of Campaigns at Parliament Street**

There is something stirring in the UK, a feeling of unease at the lack of preparedness of appropriate support for tending to the nation's mental health, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. There is a complete silence from parts of the media about the mental health crisis that is likely to evolve, a crisis that could have long-lasting social and economic effects.

Understandably the focus of this pandemic has been on treating the physical symptoms of a virus that has ravaged through the health of our four nations and placed immense strain on our health and social care services. Unsurprisingly, the spirit of our four nations has emerged, through the resolve of our health and social care workers, other key workers and by most of the public who have followed the rules. However, once this crisis subsides and those doors open again, we need to be prepared to treat and care for those whose psychological health has taken a turn for the worst during this difficult period.

Throughout this pandemic, we have learnt that preparation is key; it is now time for the UK to begin a three-staged plan to prevent the country from once again becoming overwhelmed.

### **Stage 1: Prevention**

The prevention stage must start immediately utilising a range of sectors to formulate and implement preventative measures in communities across the UK. There are a series of steps that can be taken to maintain support during Covid-19 including:

- 1. Covid-19 Mental Health Support Networks** – The UK Government must help facilitate a network of community-based support groups run by local charities and other organisations. These support groups would be provided virtually and on a timely basis to people who may need to share their feelings or concerns. The government should, where appropriate provide the financial means to smaller or specific focus charities to help facilitate appropriate online software to provide care and support during this

pandemic. This will help provide early-intervention to individuals experiencing milder forms of psychological distress.

- 2. Tracking of Community Mental Health** – New data should be collected looking at the utilisation of newly set-up *Covid-19 Mental Health Networks* to track the mental health of communities across the UK. Pre-existing data from local healthcare trusts, the police, and other public services on referral rates, mental health incidents and suicide should also be utilised in forming an overall picture of the effects of covid-19 on mental health within the community.

### **Stage 2: Advanced Prevention and Promotional Activities**

Once all the steps for stage 1 have been completed and small-scale community tracking is showing preliminary results, more advanced preventative and promotional work can take place:

- 1) Advanced action** – Informed by the preliminary evidence from tracking of community mental health, communities seen to be experiencing higher rates of mental health concerns will then be provided with further support from a range of local and national agencies. The support offered should aim to expand the availability of community specific virtual and non-virtual resources such as advice and access to online support groups.
- 2) Sub-Group Research** – Communities where psychological distress is more acute should implement further tracking measures to identify sub-groups that may be more at risk. Once identified, specific intervention measures appropriate for that sub-group should be implemented.
- 3) Targeted local and national public health campaigns** – Informed by comprehensive tracking of mental health within communities across the UK, targeted local and national mental health campaigns should be generated to signpost people to appropriate support in their communities, and offer advice on how to maintain good mental health during Covid-19. The effectiveness of these campaigns should be monitored frequently and adapted where appropriate to enable the best messaging for the general public.

### **Stage 3: Consolidation and Innovation**

- Impactful data** –Data gathered during covid-19 should be utilised to inform local and national stakeholders where further facilitation and investment may be needed to counter the mental health effects of Covid-19.

- **Informed Investment** - Ring-fenced investment must be distributed to health services and other organisations in communities experiencing high-rates of psychological distress post-Covid-19. This will assist local organisations and healthcare trusts in providing quick and efficient support to individuals experiencing poor mental health; enabling those most affected to re-engage with social and economic activities. Further facilitative support must also be offered to communities where structures and frameworks need to be upgraded to meet the mental health need posed post Covid-19.
- **Digital Mental Health Services** – Investment must be focused on innovating in the area of digital mental health provision. This type of support has already been identified as removing geographical inequities in access to treatment and could reduce the overall burden on outpatient services once they reopen in a physical form. The effectiveness of digital mental health interventions during Covid-19 should be reviewed by the NHS and other stakeholders. If the evidence suggests that digital support has been effective during the crisis, further utilisation of this type of care should be safely rolled out post Covid-19 forming a new tier to mental health care in England and the rest of the UK.

The mental health of our nation is at stake if we fail to act now. We already know how devastating mental illness can be on individuals, communities and our economy at the best of times, at the worst it could be catastrophic.