

Healthwatch Forum on Mental Health and Wellbeing

29th November 2018

The Healthwatch Harrow Forum, meeting quarterly, advises on our priorities and associated work programmes. The focus of this meeting was mental health and wellbeing, looking at the support residents require, the services they access, and how we as a community can raise awareness of local mental health issues.

This latest event, held on 29th November at Harrow Baptist Church was attended by residents, mental health service users and professionals, families, carers and community groups.

At the table discussions, delegates raised issues around Training, Service Accessibility, Medication, Information & Advice, User Involvement, Awareness and Carers.

The following themes emerged:

Training

It was acknowledged that mental health conditions cover ‘a wide spectrum’ and health professionals - particularly GPs need to learn more. In some experiences, clinicians ‘became overwhelmed’ due to lack of experience, training or expertise.

The Forum said:

Health professionals with any mental health remit should be able to demonstrate competence and work closely with colleagues to ensure correct diagnosis and holistic treatment and care.

Service Accessibility

Many people found services to be unresponsive - with telephone messages not returned (routinely in some cases). The lack of named contacts can also make it difficult to plan, or follow-up, treatment and care. Some families had ‘no alternative’ but to use emergency services - a cause of ‘huge distress’.

The Forum said:

Named contacts would provide assurance to patients, families and carers, while making services more personable, accessible and accountable. Use of emergency services including A&E may be a valid pathway, but does often cause discomfort and distress.

Medication

It was commented that medication can have side effects 'that can worsen, not improve' a person's wellbeing and delegates considered whether clinicians were overlooking alternative approaches and talking therapies.

The Forum said:

Patients should be respected when reporting side effects, and alternative therapies considered should the patient clearly not want, or has concerns about medication offered.

Information and Advice

Delegates said 'we need clear information on mental health services', including what is available, opening times, service changes and what to do if you can't get access. It was felt there is too much 'clinical-speak' and people need language they can understand.

The Forum said:

Services should use plain language wherever possible. Could we make better use of the voluntary sector to advertise and to signpost - they already hold a 'wide array of information'. A one-stop-shop for information would be welcome.

User Involvement

One person commented 'it's only when you have mental health issues, you realise what mental health is' and delegates felt that having a 'hidden condition' is harder because services may try to 'fit you into a medical model'. Mental health and learning disabilities are often ignored or overlooked, especially if clients have learned to mask their condition in order to cope, or fit in with society.

The Forum said:

We need more integrated working and information sharing between services, to achieve a holistic approach. Services need to be better at recognising and diagnosing mental health conditions, this means they need to listen to patients, families and carers.

Awareness

There is now more onus on mental health awareness in the workplace, for example many employers offer 'mental health first aid training' for staff. However, it was noted that modern working environments can be stressful and employees are 'expected to be resilient', deterring some to seek help. Clinical labels such as 'schizophrenia' may invite or encourage stigma and discrimination within society.

The Forum said:

There should be more training for staff and managers, and an 'obligation to support' employees with a mental health need. Could we consider use of 'kinder', more 'socially acceptable' labels for conditions such as schizophrenia and personality disorders?

Carers

'Care for the carers - who does?' It was felt that families and carers need more support, with better access to respite and carers assessments. Family members also say they are often 'not listened to' by professionals and this can impact on diagnosis and treatment. Some said that services 'place the onus on them' to provide care and this is 'unfair'.

The Forum said:

The mental health and wellbeing of carers should not be overlooked - carers should be encouraged and supported to get assessed, and access entitlements such as respite. When onus is placed on carers or families - is this safe, or fair?

Our database contains emerging themes on mental health. We asked the following questions, framed in various sentiment, to see which resonated with the delegates. The trends may form the basis of future work on mental health.

Agree or Disagree?

"Doctors can be too quick to reach for the medication. What about alternatives?"

Agree

"There is adequate funding for mental health services." *Disagree*

"I would like a greater choice of services. I feel like a square peg in a round hole sometimes." *Agree*

"I wasn't on the waiting list for too long." *Disagree*

"The impact of mental health on carers and family members is not fully recognised." *Agree*

"My condition was diagnosed very quickly." *Disagree*

"I got six sessions, but could really do with twice that..." *Agree*

"I am not too worried about the side effects of my medication." *Disagree*

"I find it easy to talk about my condition within the community." *Agree*

"Getting a referral was a hassle, to be honest!" *Agree*

"GPs are very knowledgeable about mental health." *Disagree*

"I find that services do work together and are joined-up." *Disagree*

"Getting through to someone on the phone can be difficult." *Agree*

"I know what to do in a crisis." *Neither agree or disagree*

"I have been given a good level of information." *Neither agree or disagree*

"I can usually get a GP appointment without difficulty." *Disagree*

"I have a regular named contact." *Neither agree or disagree*

"Hidden conditions are much harder to treat than physical conditions." *Agree*

"I feel listened to." *Neither agree or disagree*

Appendix 1 contains all comments posted by delegates during the day.

We would like to thank our volunteers for supporting the event, and all those who attended and assisted on the day.