

September 2023

# Constituencies that care:

Why voters are looking to the next election for  
improvements to the nation's mental health



## Ballot Paper

Election of Member of Parliament

Mental Health



Rethink  
Mental  
Illness.

## The public wants change; **society needs it**

Imagine a cause that has strong public support, would ease the burden on the NHS, embolden our economy, and improve the lives of millions of people in the process.

Mental health has never been a higher public priority than it is today, with an attitudinal shift being matched by a desire for tangible change. This report sets out the case for why political parties should prioritise mental health at the next general election. It features exclusive polling from research agency More in Common, which shows a public that is ahead of the curve and demanding action. The population now ranks mental health as a more important issue than unemployment, industrial action, and Brexit. Under 40s rank its importance even above climate change. There is scarcely an issue that has risen so fast up the public agenda, from being viewed as a relatively niche area of health, to a national priority in its own right.

The next government has the opportunity to channel this public sentiment, and structurally rethink the way we prevent, treat, and understand mental illness. Doing

so can unlock the potential of a nation, helping to solve the productivity puzzle, and taking strain off our health system with a move towards prevention. It will also be giving voters what they are asking for and matching the shift in public priority with a shift in government priority.

Your communities care. Your constituents care.

### **About Rethink Mental Illness**

Rethink Mental Illness is the UK's largest national charity improving the lives of people severely affected by mental illness. We provide local services, expert information, training, and campaigning. Every year we support tens of thousands of people across 90 mental health services across England, over 100 local support groups and through our advice and information services.

There are three key reasons why political parties should be prioritising mental illness at the next General Election:

- 1. It can help change lives and livelihoods:** Mental illness affects millions of people across the UK and can be life changing. Too often, those severely affected find themselves in and out of hospital, unemployed or underemployed, homeless, and facing premature mortality, including through suicide. Everyone knows someone who has suffered through mental illness; they deserve a better quality of life.
- 2. It will help our NHS and economy:** Our health system is going through a crisis. The pandemic, compounded by the country's ageing population and other workforce pressures, have created the perfect storm. Prevention is the only way forward, and preventative measures on mental illness can ease pressure on the NHS, as well as on other aspects of our societal infrastructure. Mental health problems costs the UK economy at least £118 billion a year<sup>1</sup>. It is better for society for people to be well, thriving, and investing in their community than unwell, struggling and relying on services.
- 3. It is what your voters demand:** Exclusive new polling shows public support for government action to tackle mental illness, and demonstrates that this is an issue that could change voting intention among a sizeable chunk of the population. The public are ahead of government on mental health and expecting government to catch up.

1. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2022/c-Mar-22/Mental-health-problems-cost-UK-economy-at-least-118-billion-a-year-new-research>.

Where we are;

## Where we need to go

Over the last decade, public attitudes towards mental health have positively shifted, with more openness, acceptance and understanding. These improved attitudes have been laid bare by More in Common's polling, which show that the **majority of people** now feel comfortable sharing with a friend how mental health affects their lives. Two thirds of the public say they worry about the mental health of friends and family.

The importance of mental health has been recognised by the government and there have been some tangible policy improvements in recent years. The Long-term Plan and Five Year Forward View have given a degree of direction to improve neglected services and access to them. Talking therapies are now much more available, and the Community Mental Health Framework is transforming the way community mental health services are delivered, backed by £1 billion of funding to support its rollout.

In Somerset, which was one of the early implementers of the Community Mental Health Framework, we are seeing a 15% decrease in Emergency Department mental health presentations for adults and 24% for older adults. Across all ages there was a 30% reduction in admissions for a mental health need.

In Coventry and Warwickshire we are seeing NHS money funding charities to improve mental health, resulting in greater access to talking therapies, as well as Individual Placement and Support services which help people access employment.

These improvements will certainly result in some positive mental health outcomes. However, they are not sufficient on their own and have been introduced against an incredibly challenging backdrop. **Factors such as the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis are outweighing incremental policy improvements,** and as a result demand on NHS services for mental health is greater than ever. Demand for community mental health services has grown by nearly a third in the last four years <sup>2</sup>, and in 2023, there are over 500,000 people in England living with Severe Mental Illness<sup>3</sup>. More people are being detained under the Mental Health Act. Black people are disproportionately likely to be detained, and this disparity is growing.<sup>4</sup> **As a society, we are behind where we need to be.**

To add to this, among the welcome policy movements are some government policies which are actively counterproductive in their current form. There are a catalogue of cases of serious harm and deaths by suicide associated with some of the Department for Work and Pensions' policies, with the current sanctions system making employment less likely for those impacted, rather than incentivising it. A lack of mental health social care and supported housing is preventing inpatients from being discharged from hospital, depriving people of liberty when they are well enough for release, and costing the taxpayer enormously.

2. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/news-item/nhs-mental-health-services-what-s-changed>

3. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/rightcare-physical-health-and-severe-mental-illness-scenario/>

4. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/mental-health/detentions-under-the-mental-health-act/latest>

# Where should we go from here?

The need to address mental illness is as desperate as ever, but addressing it is within the gift of the next government. **The key is to look at the topic holistically, with a strong focus on prevention,** identifying the determinants of mental illness and addressing them at their source.

As such, mental illness must become a cross-government issue, with determinants identified and addressed wherever they arise. We already recognise the need to do this with physical health. Of course, the NHS is a central aspect of the physical health system, but we also have mandatory PE lessons in schools to keep children fit and healthy, safety regulations in the workplace to prevent accidental injury, and nutritional information on food and drink packaging. Without extending a cross-government approach to mental health, this problem will remain too much about firefighting, and not enough about fireproofing.

Our polling demonstrates that the public overwhelmingly view mental illness as an issue that requires action across government and the public sector, rather than viewing it solely through the prism of the NHS. A government that integrates mental health into its policies on education, welfare, crime, and other important issues, can expect those policies to get a more sympathetic viewing from the public in turn.

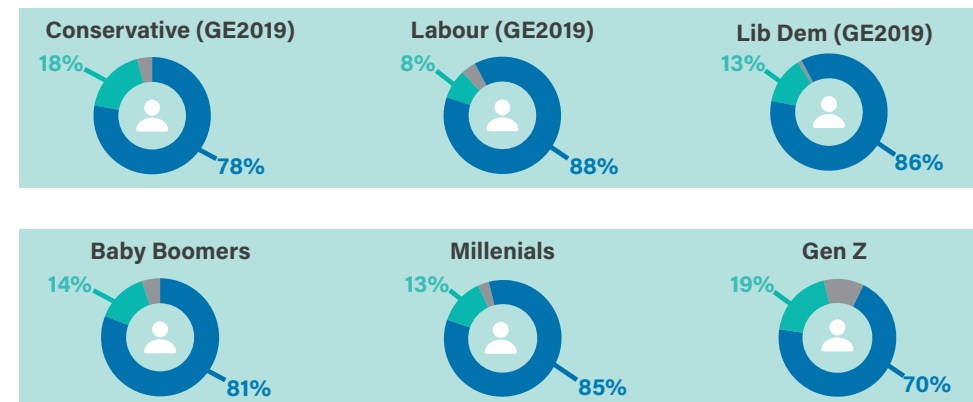
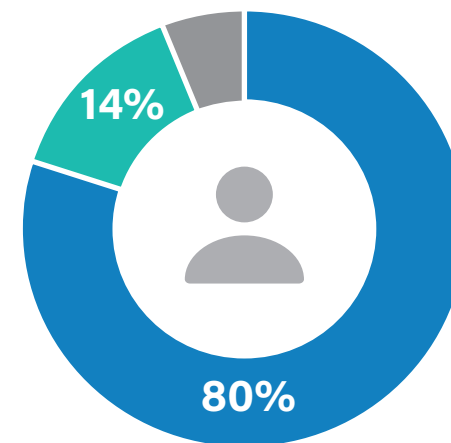
These are the principles that must underpin the next government's strategy on mental health: a prevention-led, cross-government agenda, which will benefit our individuals, our institutions and our economy.

The research agency More in Common have carried out new polling, which shines a light on how the public perceive a wide array of issues surrounding mental health and mental illness.

## Openness about mental health

*How comfortable, if at all, would you feel if a friend shared how their mental health affects their life?*

- Not comfortable
- Comfortable
- Don't Know



British people are overwhelmingly comfortable hearing peoples experiences of mental health, demonstrating how far we have come in openness towards the subject. This trend is true across voting intention, age and sex, with only minimal variation.

The public are also concerned about mental health at present, particularly the mental health of loved ones.



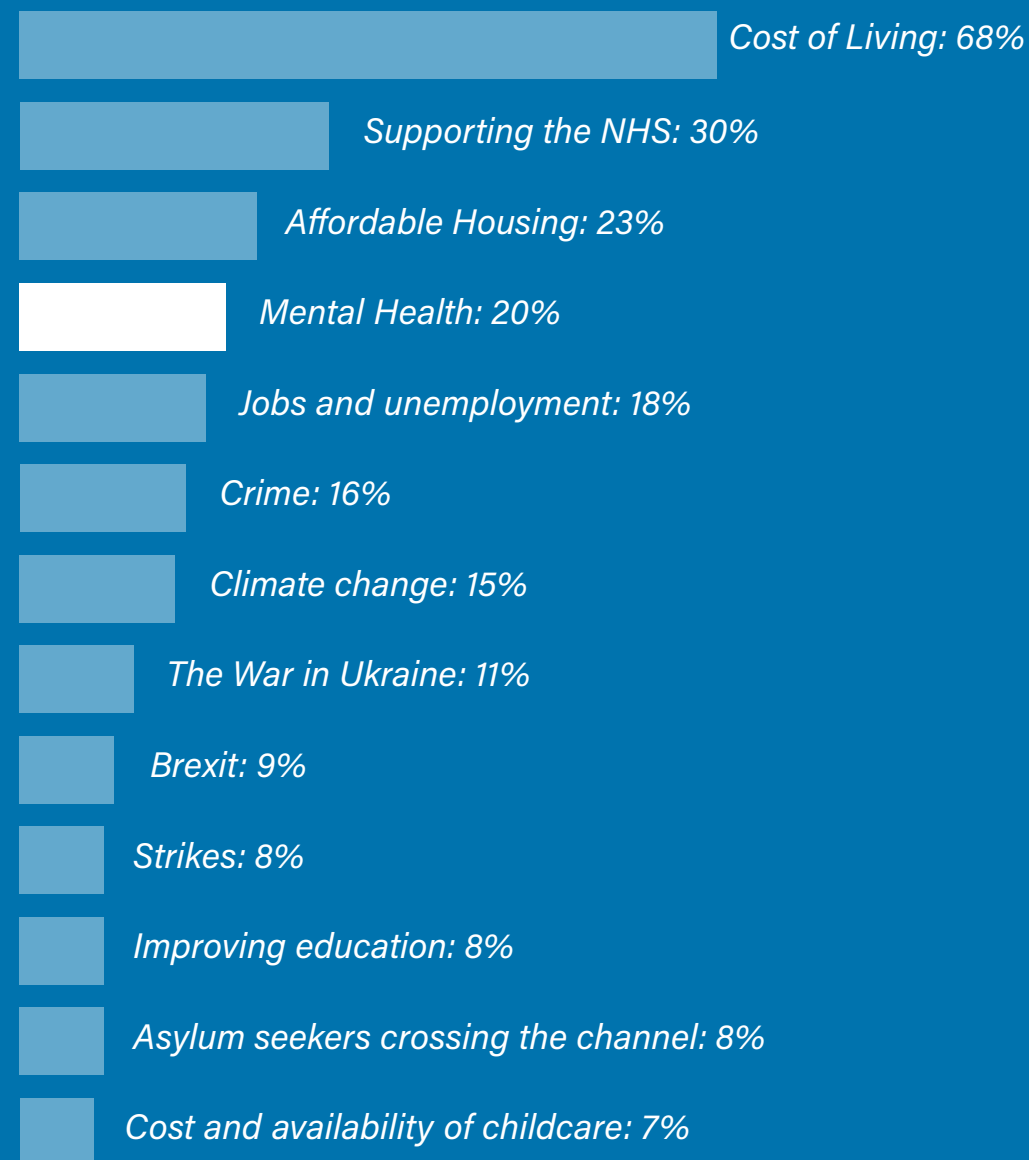
## Two out of three people state that they worry about mental health of friends and/or family

### Issue prioritisation and voting intention

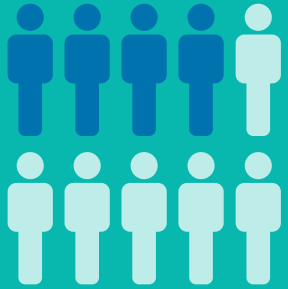
In surveying the relative salience of mental health, we found that the public view mental health as more important than other very significant issues like jobs and unemployment, Brexit, and strike action.

This issue is set to continue to rise on the public agenda, with Under 40s ranking its importance extremely highly.

Under 40s were asked to select the three most important issues facing the UK out of a wide ranging list. The graph below shows the percentage who selected each option. As you can see, mental health is prioritised above issues like climate change, crime and the war in Ukraine.



And more significantly still, a substantial proportion of voters care about mental health to such a degree that the issue can change their vote.

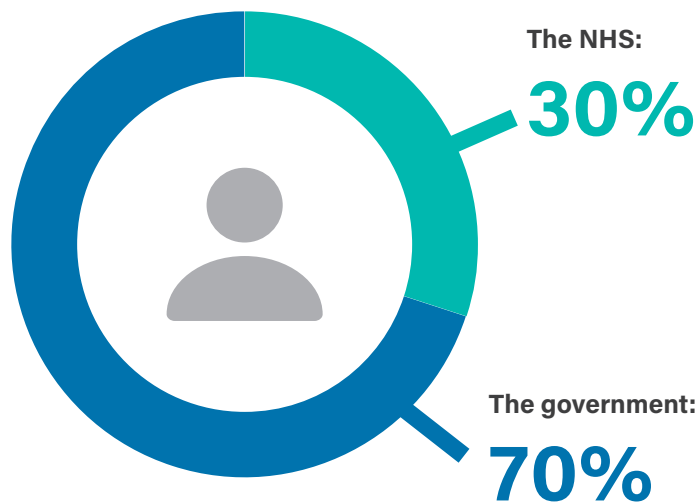


**4 in 10 say**

mental health will be important in shaping their decision on which party to vote for at the next General Election.

The public believe that responsibility for improving the mental health of the nation lies with the government.

**Who do you hold more responsible for the state of the nation's mental health?**



# How we can deliver change with the next government

Rethink Mental Illness has been working alongside government, civil servants and political parties on a range of issues, and our team of policy experts are constantly developing innovative and evidence-based ways to improve mental health outcomes, with solutions that are both feasible and tangible.

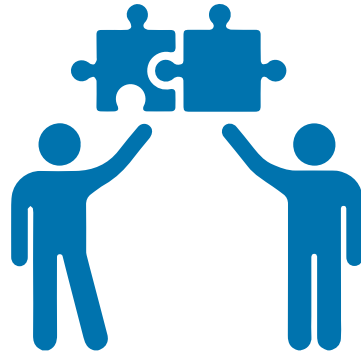
We want to work with the next government to improve lives, take pressure off the NHS and save taxpayer money. Across the following areas in particular, political parties can make commitments now which can be achieved in the next parliament by industry and government delivering together.

## A 21st century Mental Health Act

The Mental Health Act is the single most significant piece of legislation impacting people severely affected by mental illness, as it concerns the circumstances in which a person can be detained under section. It is also 40 years old and in desperate need of reform. A cross-party and cross-sector group of politicians, experts by experience, clinicians and organisations have worked over the last six years to create a blueprint for new legislation to modernise the Act, placing dignity and autonomy at the centre of patient care, and tackling the racial inequalities in how the act is applied. The next government can commit to implementing a new 21st century Mental Health Act, signalling a step change on mental illness for years to come.

“

**The next government can commit to implementing a new 21st century Mental Health Act**



“

**This investment in mental health has already changed lives, but it is crucial that it is renewed by the next government**

## Investing in the NHS and social care

In 2019, the sector welcomed £2.3bn per year of investment for NHS mental health services until 2023/24. Since then, the pandemic has had an enormous impact on the mental health of many, especially young people, and has contributed to a wider crisis in the health system and social care. This investment in mental health has already changed lives, but it is crucial that it is renewed by the next government so the health and care system and third sector can finish implementing the ambitions of the NHS Long Term plan. This is the only way we can sustainably tackle waiting lists, decrease A&E presentations and admissions and ultimately improve outcomes.

## More places to call home

Access to homes is another important predictor of mental health outcomes. Supported housing can be imperative for preventing deterioration, but also for recovery from a period of severe mental illness. However, at present there are not enough supported housing options for those who need them. The number of days of delayed mental health hospital discharge due to a lack of supported accommodation has risen by 70% in the last year to 68,626. Each of those days costs taxpayer money, costs individuals their liberties, and takes valuable bed space away from others in need. In partnership with New Philanthropy Capital (NPC), we are working with local systems to explore and test how national investment through a blended finance model could unlock and increase the sustainable supply of quality supported housing. Working with the next government will be vital to turn this vision into reality, and provide more people living with a mental illness a place to call home.

“

**Working with the next government will be vital to turn this vision into reality, and provide more people living with a mental illness a place to call home.**



## Cross-government focus for a cross-government issue

As detailed throughout this report, the most crucial commitment any incoming government can make is to delivering a long term, cross-government plan for mental health. The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) has already conducted a wide ranging consultation on what such a plan could include and a coalition of mental health charities, the Mental Health Policy Group, is dedicated to supporting government designing and implementing a plan building on work across all government departments. A holistic approach is the only way to embed prevention in society and relieve pressure on the health system in the long run.

“

**A holistic approach is the only way to embed prevention in society and relieve pressure on the health system in the long run.**



**Waiting lists for young people to receive community and hospital care remain too long, and transitions between child and adult care make treatment more disjointed for many.**

## Putting young people at the core of mental health reform

The impact of the pandemic on young peoples' mental health has been vast, with a 53% increase in under-18s referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health services in 2022 compared to 2019<sup>5</sup>. There has been increasing political focus on this issue, which we welcome. A prevention led approach can only work if it has young people at its core. However, waiting lists for young people to receive community and hospital care remain too long, and transitions between child and adult care make treatment more disjointed for many. Improvements to the health system need to take place with a laser focus on the experiences of children and young people, making services easier to access and navigate.

5. <https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk/news/clinical-areas/mental-health-and-addiction/record-number-of-under-18s-referred-to-camhs-last-year/>

## Money and mental health

The link between money and mental health is clear, with financial and economic struggles strongly correlated with mental health worsening. The government should be aware of these links and work not to exacerbate them.

The welfare system is a good example of where improvement is needed. Clearly, to provide social security for people who are unwell, the government needs to establish evidence of that sickness. However, there is broad consensus that the current method for assessing capability to work is not good enough, and is often implemented by people with insufficient knowledge of mental illness. This tends to make people's health worse, and keeps them out of work for longer, reducing productivity and increasing public expenditure on welfare. Tragically, it has also led to deaths by suicide.

We need careful reform of the welfare system to ensure approaches to assessments are rooted in lived experience, and trauma-informed. It should be possible to assess capability without making illnesses worse by sanctioning people improperly. We welcome commitments from all major parties to address this issue, and we are confident that we can create a new, fairer system, alongside a focus on supporting those who want to stay in or return to work.



**We need careful reform of the welfare system to ensure approaches to assessments are rooted in lived experience and trauma-informed**





All new data comes from the research agency More in Common, who were commissioned by Rethink Mental Illness to conduct polling on mental health and mental illness for this report.

**Rethink  
Mental  
Illness.**



[facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://facebook.com/rethinkcharity)



[twitter.com/rethink\\_](https://twitter.com/rethink_)



[rethink.org](https://rethink.org)

Leading the way to a better quality of life for everyone severely affected by mental illness.

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0121 522 7007  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

**rethink.org**



**CYBER  
ESSENTIALS**



**INVESTORS IN PEOPLE**  
We Invest in people Silver



Rethink Mental Illness, a company limited by guarantee. Registered in England Number 1227970. Registered Charity Number 271028. Registered Office 28 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7GR. Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (Firm Registration Number 624502).

© Rethink Mental Illness 2023.