

Executive Summary

The TFG's full Terms of Reference, which are given in section ... (section numbering would be useful!), can be summarised as:

- The provision of mental health services to the homeless, and those at risk of becoming homeless, and those discharged onto the street from care,
- The impact of mental health problems on those groups;
- The practical barriers to delivery of health services to those groups and engagement of the individuals;
- To work with partners to make recommendations to improve the services.

The Committee received evidence from a wide variety of service providers to this group, both of health services and more general support services and reviewed a number of national reports.

A graphic picture was painted of the effects of mental health on these groups. Organisations, both locally and nationally, painted a dire picture of the impact on the homeless of their mental health conditions.

The comparative isolation and stigmatisation of the homeless from society causes mental health problems in itself and increasing clinical depression is a natural result of being in such a position. Psychosis is also far more common in the homeless than in other groups, indicating that it, too, develops in this situation. Many victims of domestic violence suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Many homeless people experience difficulty in registering with a GP. While they can be given small amounts of medication in a crisis or on discharge from hospital, this soon runs out, leaving them with no medicine, so their condition gets worse. Frequently, they will not be able to register for benefits and so may have to pay for medication, which sooner, or later, they will probably be unable to do. If they miss an appointment, for whatever reason, there may be no reliable way of contacting them to make a repeat appointment, so lack of medication is, eventually, almost inevitable. If they miss more appointments, perhaps as a direct result of their worsening condition, they may be deregistered from their GP, aggravating physical, as well as mental health issues.

The physical health of the homeless is always at risk; they routinely suffer from the effects of broken sleep and the weather. They are likely to have little or no income for food, leading to erratic energy levels and the longer term impacts of malnutrition; they may have little access to hygiene facilities and may also be subject to physical injury - a combination which can frequently lead to disease. Even without any physical disease, these conditions will put stress on their systems, making poor mental health worse.

As a result of their poor mental health, the homeless will have difficulty in relating to support services, including health services and so be at greater risk of deregistration, or of being barred from the services that could help them. Some will be picked up by the police for dangerous or disturbing behaviour and get some support from the custody support team. However, they will eventually be back on the streets, with the cycle starting again.

The average life expectancy of the long term homeless is as low as 47 years of age, versus 77 years for the general population.

A number of recommendations (given in full in section..) have been made to improve services: (do we want to include these in full or just precis them as Jenni has below?)

- A Homeless Health Needs audit, the results to be fed into the various plans currently being developed;
- Better integration of all support services, and in particular health services for this group;
- Increased provision of discharge, crisis and ongoing specialist mental health care;
- More support for registration with a GP and for homeless patients interacting with GP services;
- More effective access to medication and medical appointments;
- Improved access to food via the foodbank;
- Investigation of whether any further support can be made available for other service interactions such as housing, employment, benefits, etc; and
- That the group reconvene in 9-12 months' time to review progress.