

THINK
AHEAD

Our stories

2014 - 2024





We're proud to have supported the mental health workforce since 2014.

Discover what we've achieved, through the personal testimonies of people with lived experience of mental health, our NHS and social care partners, trainees, alumni, and mental health practitioners.



Our stories

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2014

Dr Sarah Carr

Lived Experience
Involvement Lead

.....

2015

Sir Norman Lamb

Chair of the South London
and Maudsley NHS
Foundation Trust

.....

2016

Ella Joseph & Natalie Acton

Founding CEOs

.....

2017

Erica Wise

Consultant Social Worker

.....

2018

Oliver Wood

Lived Experience Partner

.....

2019

Thea Radburn

Alumni Community Member

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2020

Jacqui Bell

Lead Practice Specialist

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2021

Levi Chambers-Cook

Alumni Community Member
and Trustee

.....

2022

Tom Green

Practice Specialist

.....

2023

Katrice Russell

Alumni Community Member

.....

2024

Bekwele Nworgu

Think Ahead Trainee



Professor Dame Carol Black GBE

Chair of Trustees

“It has been a privilege to chair Think Ahead’s Board of Trustees for the past 10 years. As you’ll see from these stories, there’s something quite special about the charity.

With over 1,000 people joining its programme to become specialist mental health social workers, it’s certainly delivering on its ambitions.

It has also enabled and encouraged people passionate about mental health to work in the sector.

But more than that: it’s helping change the way we deliver mental health support, purposefully bridging the gap between health and social care.

Because mental health isn’t just a health issue. It’s something that can affect every area of your life, and our support system needs to reflect that.

I am proud of all we’ve achieved together and of Think Ahead’s invaluable contribution to our mental health services.”



Philippa Mariani

CEO

“What a joy it is to celebrate these last 10 years of Think Ahead.

It began with the spark of an idea to make the social, economic and environmental factors affecting people’s mental health the bedrock of training for careers in the sector.

From that spark grew the highly regarded organisation that Think Ahead is today, which is leading the charge on promoting the social approach in mental health services to complement medical and psychological support for people.

Reading this collection of stories, our charity’s commitment to improving people’s lives shines through, as does our commitment to the development of the mental health workforce.

And that commitment to the workforce is an important one.

We cannot hope to support people’s mental health needs unless we invest in our practitioners. Without them, there is no support.

We have achieved a great deal in our first 10 years, but with mental health needs continuing to outpace stretched services, our work is far from done.

We are grateful for the Department of Health and Social Care’s vision and ongoing support of our work, IPPR’s support in our early years, the dedication of our academic partner Middlesex University, and our NHS trust and local authority partners.

Standing together with these partners, the people who use our mental health services and the professionals who run them, we look forward to building a thriving mental health workforce fit for the future.”



Dr Sarah Carr

Lived Experience Involvement Lead

From the very beginning, lived experience has grounded and shaped our work. Dr Sarah Carr shares her own experience of mental ill health and her involvement in our Lived Experience Partnership.

“I know what a difference a good mental health professional can make. I was hospitalised once and when I came out, I was supported by a community mental health team.

While my psychiatrist dealt with my medication, it was my mental health social worker and community mental health nurse who really helped me with my personal recovery.

My own lived experience motivates me to work with others who have lived experience to improve and develop mental health services and support. I got involved with Think Ahead right at the beginning when I was invited to bring together a group of service users and carers to guide and influence the organisation and programme set up.

Believe it or not, Think Ahead was quite controversial when it began. Its approach was different, and some feathers were ruffled, but I was curious to know how I and other people with lived experience could help shape it. It was important for us to be there from the outset.

As the charity has evolved over the past 10 years, so too has lived experience involvement. Starting as the Service User and Carer Reference Group, the group is now the Lived Experience Partnership and our partners have developed their own identity and role. They bring a wealth of experience, knowledge, skills and talents and are hugely valued by us, our trainees and our partners.

Together we're fostering a culture of co-production and there's involvement across every area of our work. One of our lived experience partners said they're 'sandpaper people' whose grit shapes our work, and I think they have a very good point.”



2014

Founding year and formation of our Service User and Carer Reference Group (now the Lived Experience Partnership)



Sir Norman Lamb

Chair of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust

Sir Norman Lamb, former Liberal Democrat MP and Minister of State for Care and Support, reflects on the issues Think Ahead was created to resolve, and why he is such a huge advocate for better mental health services.

“10 years ago there were various fast-track programmes being created for the public sector but there was a gap in adult social work.

As Minister for Care and Support at the time, it was my decision to establish Think Ahead. Working in politics can be frustrating, with great ideas to improve things coming and going but never developing into anything. With Think Ahead though, we came up with a plan and – with guidance and advice from IPPR and various key people – we made it happen.

We are all shaped by experiences we have in our lives. Our family is no different to most others and we’ve had our own experiences of mental health problems. Our oldest son was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder when he was a teenager, which is a cruel and painful condition.

We came up against a system that felt like it was failing us. We were able to escape from it to some extent and pay for treatment and support. But most people can’t do that, and they’re left waiting.

Also, my older sister Catherine took her own life in her mid-60s, after spending 10 weeks as a voluntary inpatient. I was left thinking – did that hospital stay help her?

I once heard a Think Ahead social worker speak about how they work with people to rebuild lives and I was left thinking we should be devoting more energy to helping people rebuild their lives, rather than containing them in old fashioned institutions.

I have a sense of pride for the role I played at the start of Think Ahead, but I’m immensely grateful to everyone who has taken the idea and created something that is real, powerful and effective.”



2015

Official launch by Care and Support Minister, Norman Lamb

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Lauren, c
worried

Rosalind



Natalie Acton & Ella Joseph

Founding co-chief executives

Co-chief executives Ella Joseph and Natalie Acton set up Think Ahead in response to IPPR's recommendations for a graduate programme in mental health social work.

"In 2014, IPPR published Jonathan Clifton and Craig Thorley's report *Think Ahead: Meeting the workforce challenges in mental health social work*, which set out the value of social work in mental health settings.

It was clear that despite social work being an integral part of the mental health workforce, the role was often overlooked and without the same prioritisation or public awareness held by clinical roles.

We both worked in the civil service and had seen the effectiveness of fast-track schemes in areas such as education and children's services. There was real excitement amongst ministers and mental health campaigners at the prospect of mirroring that success in mental health social work.

We founded the charity and the social work programme alongside our brilliant co-directors and colleagues at IPPR, the think tank that incubated our charity at the start of its journey.

Our strategy and vision were very much informed by the voice of the sector, and the experience of people with mental health problems. We built it in partnership with the sector. It was always important to us as founders that our programme was complementary, not in competition, with other innovation.



2016

First mental health social worker trainees begin our flagship programme



Natalie Acton & Ella Joseph

Founding co-chief executives

We ensured the programme promoted the 'social approach' within mental health teams. We could see that people accessing support for mental health problems needed help navigating the system. What was often missing was the acknowledgement and ability to grapple with all of the daily challenges affecting each person's wellbeing. We knew a social worker would fulfil that role.

We remember shadowing social workers, seeing the breadth of expertise within their roles, their compassion, their commitment to the people they support. They gave a sense of hope.

Social work is often known in children and family settings. That was a key challenge affecting the sector: there were not enough placements within mental health teams for those entering the profession. We built partnerships with NHS mental health trusts and local authority teams to establish those much-needed mental health placements.

We were delighted with the level of interest in our first cohort; we started recruitment in 2015 to begin the programme in 2016. It was clear people wanted to work in mental health, but many did not want to pursue the traditional training routes. Our programme offered something new: combining academic learning with early on-the-job training specifically in mental health and building a sense of community through our cohort model. People were able to support and learn from one another.

We have been delighted to see how Think Ahead has developed and grown over the last ten years. We're not complacent though. Many of the same challenges in that IPPR report a decade ago remain today. Social work must be a core part of a mental health workforce. It is vital that Think Ahead continues to flourish to bring future generations into this essential profession."



Erica Wise

Consultant Social Worker, East London NHS Foundation Trust

Combining academic learning with on-the-job experience, our trainees make a difference right from the start of their training journey and are supported throughout.

“I knew that as their Consultant Social Worker I would be an influence on the trainees and I never forgot that.

They looked to you for everything, and I felt quite humbled through that experience and the responsibility of it. It was exciting but also challenging at times – in some ways I learned as much from them as they did from me.

Jacqui, Think Ahead's Lead Practice Specialist, was a huge support right from the start. We worked together well – we're both Luton girls, so there was a lot of reminiscing! There was actually great support across the programme – from the university, my organisation and Think Ahead – that I made use of and encouraged the trainees to lean on it too.

A fast-track programme isn't for everybody, but for a lot of people it is. Some people felt it wasn't long enough to train as a social worker, but the proof is in the pudding with my experiences of the trainees.

They developed a good reputation in the Trust for being solid and knowing what they were doing. After a few years people were fighting over having them in their team.

The best thing was to watch them develop. I've kept in contact with many of them and seeing how their careers have gone in different directions or how they've progressed as social workers is really satisfying.

When I watched them develop into good social workers, I knew my job was done.”



2017

Think Ahead's first social workers in mental health qualify

Our impact

We're growing the mental health workforce

1,000

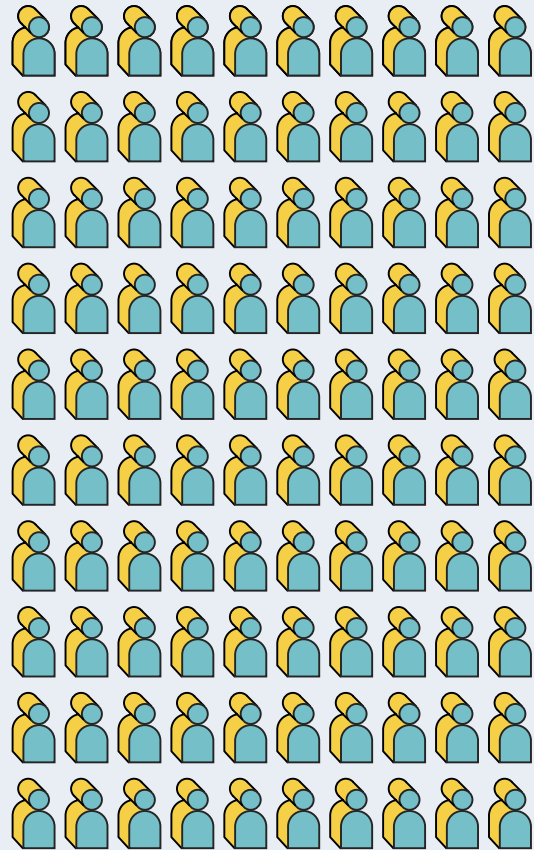
Over 1,000 trainees joined us to become social workers in mental health.



80% of Think Ahead trainees are still working in mental health services, **three years after qualification.**

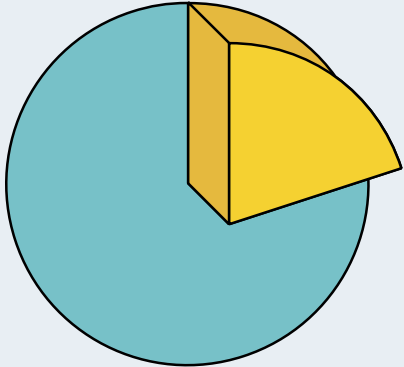
160

We train up to 160 social workers in mental health a year.

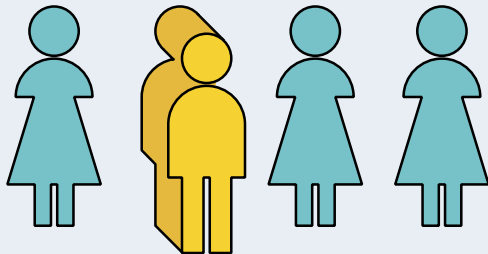


On average, we receive over 90 registrations for every available training place with us.

We're driving diversity in the mental health workforce



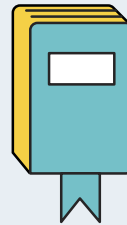
1 in 5 of our trainees come from Black, Asian and ethnically diverse backgrounds.



Just under 25% of our trainees identify as male, far exceeding the social work sector average.



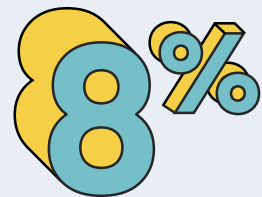
1 in 5 of our trainees were eligible for **free school meals** growing up.



Nearly half of our trainees' parents did not attend university.



Our trainees range from 21 to 58 years of age.



8% of our trainees identify as having a disability.

Our impact

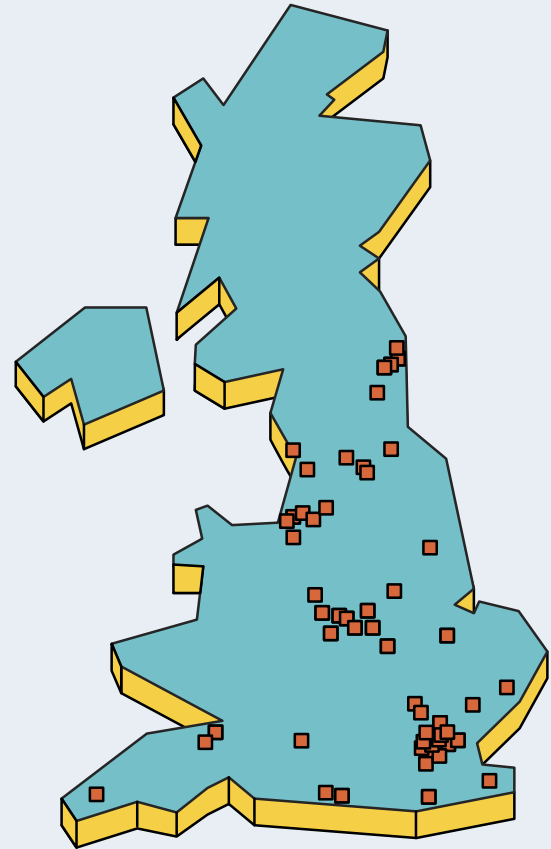
And we're improving services for people

50,000

Our trainees have supported over **50,000 people** living with mental health needs.

96%

96% of our programme's NHS and local authority operational leads **recommend partnering with us to help improve mental health services.**



Our trainees have worked in over 100 mental health services **across every locality of England.**

Oliver Wood

Lived Experience Partner

Chair of our Lived Experience Partnership 2018-2023, Oliver shares his personal motivations for being part of Think Ahead and the lived experience movement.

“I started using mental health services when I was a child. I had my first inpatient stay when I was 15, and one another couple of years later which was a deeply unpleasant experience.

Mental health services were an integral part of my life, but a lot of what I experienced felt like it was out of my control. I got lost in what happened around me, and I wasn't able to say what I wanted.

I felt that I didn't matter as a person to the services looking after me. That experience firmed my resolve to be involved in my own care as much as I could and not “done to” as much.

When I found Think Ahead I was pleased to see the voices of people with lived experience having such a clear impact. It felt like – this is something that's going to make a difference.

A key part of creating good mental health services is good relationships. We need to bring together the professionals and the people who are using the services to create shared understanding and shared values.

The absolute best feeling is when I get a question or a comment from a trainee that shows their thinking has changed – they're starting to see less of the system, the labels and the diagnosis, and more of the person and how they can work together.

Seeing that spark of change shows that the work we're doing will pay off for years, and that person will make a really positive difference in the world. Those moments are huge and that's what drives me to want to keep doing more.”



2018

Chair of Lived Experience Partnership appointed



Thea Radburn

Alumni Community Member

From being part of our first cohort, to being named Social Worker of the Year, Thea reflects on her social work journey and the pride it's brought her.

“The best part of my job is when I discharge someone – I mean that in a really positive way!

When I finish working with someone, I love talking to them about how far they've come, and what they have achieved – it's great to have been able to support and cheer someone on from the sidelines, and it's a proud moment to see people achieve their recovery goals.

I joined Think Ahead as part of the first cohort in 2016 and have been passionate about social work since day one! The people I've worked with really stick with me, especially the ones who've regained their independence and passion for life.

There are some more difficult days, when I'm working with people who are severely unwell, and whose recovery might look quite different.

It is always a privilege to be part of someone's story, and I remind myself of the people who've gone on to do amazing things and achieved their goals, and that I've been lucky enough to help facilitate some of those moments.

I'm also now a trained Cognitive Behavioural Therapist (CBT). I wanted to wear both hats: practically supporting people with their day-to-day needs and being able to offer therapeutic support.

In 2019, a service user I was working with came into the NHS trust building I was working in and handed the receptionist a compliment she'd written, asking her to nominate me for a staff award.

My supervisor then nominated me for the national awards, and I was so surprised when I won. I felt real imposter syndrome as I'd only been a social worker for a few years, but it was a really proud moment.”



2019

Alumni community member wins the independent Social Worker of the Year Award



Jacqui Bell

Lead Practice Specialist

Leading our Practice Specialist Team of experienced social workers, Jacqui reflects on how Think Ahead has transformed through the Covid-19 pandemic and across the past 10 years.

“I always go back to where we started, what we do now and how we’ve transformed.

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown were transformational for my team and for all our trainees. Looking back, it’s hard to believe that we didn’t know what would happen. Can we run our programme during lockdown? What is the experience going to be like for people accessing mental health services?

It was a difficult time for many of us but also a time to think of different ways of working and connecting – many of which we still use now. We’ve especially embraced the benefits of using technology to support us going forward. I think the group that found it more complex is the people accessing mental health services.

If they don’t see a person in real life and don’t have face-to-face meetings, that perhaps needs more thought around how it works and feels for them.

Reflecting on the past ten years, my highlight is always the Summer Institute; having fun on campus and getting to know trainees outside of learning environments. Sitting in on lectures reminds me of when I was a social worker, reflecting on my journey and the journey the trainees are about to embark on.

It’s a reminder about the importance of always being person-centered and how you never stop learning – even though I qualified as a social worker a long time ago!”



2020

Programme adapts during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown



Levi Chambers-Cook

Alumni Community Member and Trustee

Levi trained with us in the very first year of the programme and is the first alumni representative on our board, bringing invaluable frontline insights to strategic decisions.

“10 years on and Think Ahead maintains such a clear vision and purpose.

As a social worker, you consistently strive to achieve justice for the people you work with. Think Ahead supports this ethos and evokes a strong sense of passion in its trainees. It connects them to research, social policy and new initiatives to push boundaries and improve people’s lives.

On the Board of Trustees, we constantly ask ourselves: what impact can Think Ahead make at personal, professional, organisational and societal levels?

What is our aspiration for people who use mental health services? How can social workers harness their training to change thinking, attitudes and culture in their workplaces? And, on a broader more strategic level, how can we prioritise the focus on social issues in all mental health services?

Traditional health roles are clearly important, but we needn’t always solely rely on the medical model. Social work may not always be as visible as other professions but that does not diminish its importance.

Doctors can’t sit down with you to look at your relationships, tackle your finances, or help you apply for housing or a visa. This approach is unique to the social work role and with that, the potential impact on somebody’s life is significant.

The ambition and mission of the charity feels as relevant to me now as an operational manager, as it did when I started my training. I am proud to have been part of the 10-year journey and feel excited about what the future holds.



2021

First alumni community member joins the Board of Trustees



Tom Green

Practice Specialist

Tom progressed from direct practice in child protective services to practice education. Here he shares his passion for developing the next generation of social workers.

“I think it’s important to be honest and show both sides of the coin. The more difficult side of the coin for me was that child protection was cumulatively chipping away at me over six or seven years.

I got so much from it and became, I think, a good social worker, but it did have an impact on me. The other side of the coin though is that social work is a world where you share the same values and passions as the people that you’re working alongside.

As a practice specialist, overseeing training placements, I’m here for our trainees and our consultant social workers, making sure they’re all supported as best as they can be. We know that everyone’s doing their best in difficult circumstances and we’re here to problem solve or just be a listening

ear if that’s what’s needed, to help make sense of situations and help people move forward with their learning.

What I’ve really loved about Think Ahead is how closely we work with the Lived Experience Partnership – it’s just such a strength of the organisation. I’ve seen it more and more invested into and I know the trainees take a lot from the involvement of our Lived Experience Partners, as does everyone at Think Ahead.

The great joy I get from this role is just being inspired by the students and being part of and observing their journey. Training to be a social worker is a journey where people learn a lot about themselves as well as learning a lot about the job.

From day one to the end of year one and beyond, you can really see how the students grow, how they challenge themselves and how they are challenged by the job.”



2022 Expansion of expertise in the Practice Specialist Team to every region in England



Katrice Russell

Member of Alumni Community

As a frontline worker, Katrice reflects on the importance of the mental health workforce and the impact social workers can have on people's lives.

“The dedication and passion of the staff I work with inspire me every day. They're resilient, intelligent, and truly committed to tackling injustice.

I joined my community mental health team as a Think Ahead trainee and was thrilled to be able to stay with them after qualifying.

Staff turnover can be an issue in mental health services, but one of the standout aspects of the programme for me was the support I received from my consultant social worker. Her passion for social work was infectious and incredibly inspiring. I formed really strong working relationships with my colleagues too.

It was my colleagues who nominated me for an award. That was such a humbling experience.

It was for a joint project that I ran with occupational health and a local charity, NOAH, to support people who were rough sleeping. Two months in the making, we created a self-care day for people, offering them everything from essential products to haircuts, and the much-needed safe space to talk to social workers about their mental health. Those things can seem small but have such an impact.

The beauty of this profession is that it allows you to make a difference on so many levels. If you're passionate about something, you can make ripples of change with the people you're working with, in your local area and even on a national level – contributing to the systems and structures that affect people's lives.

The people I support are a huge motivation. Seeing their progress, even small wins, is incredibly rewarding and reminds me why I do this work. Every small change contributes to a larger movement towards justice and wellbeing.”



2023

**Alumni community member
Katrice wins East London NHS
Improving Service User
Experience Award**



Bekwele Nworgu

Think Ahead Trainee

Nearing his second year on the programme, Beks shares his thoughts on social work and the importance of representation in mental health services.

“If I’m honest, I feel like I’m carrying a lot of weight.

There’s a high turnover in social work and knowing how important the support we offer is for people, I want to find some longevity.

Our mental health services are still dominated by medical treatments which aren’t always enough or right for people. Social workers can be a voice for people and help them find other support to move forward.

I also feel a weight as a black man. Only around a quarter of mental health social workers are men, and there are even less ethnically diverse men.

Growing up and living in an area like London, you see a lot of inequalities, which are being reflected in our mental health services. Out of every ethnic group, black people are most likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act. Far too many people from black backgrounds and ethnic minorities are detained. That’s something I’ve witnessed firsthand and want to help change.

Another area that resonates with me is the high number of men dying by suicide. We need men to be able to feel they can access support and openly discuss their mental health more.

As a starting point, I’m focusing on what I can do. And that is: empower people and encourage them to find their own way to a better life for themselves. That’s the best support we can offer. It’s not always straightforward, but I’m pleased to be there to offer that hope and support.”



2024

Next generation of Think Ahead social workers begin their training journey



A career in social work will open your eyes and heart in ways you could never imagine.”

Catherine Andrews
Think Ahead Practice Specialist



Social workers are more influential than any other service. They can make such a difference when they listen to the people they’re working with.”

Saffron
Lived Experience Partner




It’s a pleasure to have supported so many motivated trainees with strong values to become successful social workers.”

David Bulmer
Senior Lecturer in Social Work,
Middlesex University



We cannot hope to support people’s mental health needs unless we invest in our practitioners. Without them, there is no support.”

Philippa Mariani
Think Ahead CEO








We believe everyone living with mental health needs should be empowered to live the life they want and deserve. To achieve this, we need a thriving mental health workforce.

Our organisation recruits, trains and develops mental health practitioners, ensuring the right professionals can deliver the right support at the right time.

If you are interested in working alongside us or finding out more, contact us on hello@thinkahead.org.

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