



Think Ahead's Strategy 2023 – 2028

Our vision for a thriving
mental health workforce



Introduction from our CEO



I am delighted to be introducing Think Ahead's five-year strategy: our commitment to do all we can to support the mental health workforce.

When I joined Think Ahead last year, I was struck by the passion for our purpose within the team. We are motivated by our determination to see the workforce grow, for greater investment, and opportunities to connect and develop the workforce, so that every person who experiences mental health problems receives timely, tailored, and holistic support.

Over the last eight years, we have built up expertise in recruitment, retention, and skills development in mental health teams in local authorities and NHS trusts across the country. We have trained nearly 1,000 people through our two-year social work programme. We believe in the vital (and often overlooked) role social workers and the social model play in mental health provision. We will continue to develop the programme, support our graduates through our alumni community, and advocate for social workers and the social approach to be prioritised and embedded throughout the mental health system.

We want to build on the success of our flagship social work programme, and to utilise our resources and expertise more widely: closing the gaps in provision and knowledge, and helping organisations overcome challenges whether in recruitment, retention or wider systemic issues.

We know people are working in very difficult conditions. We will be bolder in our support for the workforce; we will advocate for growth, for investment, for transformation.

What follows is an overview of how we will get there. This is just the start. Our work will be developed by listening and learning from our partners, from practitioners, and from people with lived experience of mental health services.

Our vision is a thriving mental health workforce. One that has the investment it needs to support people to live the life they want and deserve.

We look forward to working with many of you to make this a reality.



Philippa
CEO

Our vision

A thriving mental health workforce able to support people to live the life they want.

Our mission

We recruit, train, and promote a thriving mental health workforce. We advocate for professionals to have the right resources to deliver the right support at the right time.

Who we are

We are a national mental health workforce non-profit organisation with a social purpose.

We believe

Embedding and prioritising the social approach within the workforce builds a more effective response to people with mental health needs.

Suitable housing, access to education and employment, safe and secure relationships and communities, and financial security must be prioritised within a skilled and effective workforce if people are to live mentally healthy lives.

Mental health problems are not just medical conditions, and supporting people doesn't just mean treating their symptoms.

Why we exist

Mental health is one of our defining national challenges. One in four adults in England experience mental ill-health, a third of families include someone with a mental health problem, and the suicide rate has been steadily increasing for the last decade.

But against this backdrop of increasing need, there is a crisis in recruitment and retention in the health and social care workforce. This has profound impact on both practitioners and people who use services: delayed support, long waiting times, high turnover which leads to inconsistent support, burnout in the workforce, losing precious skills and expertise as experienced practitioners leave the frontline.

We urgently need a well-resourced workforce with the skills and systems in place to respond effectively and empathetically to the growing population need for support, whether in prevention, early intervention or ongoing care, treatment, and support.

We cannot hope to meet the mental health challenge without investing in the workforce.

Our values

Inspirational

We set ambitious goals, and we build great partnerships to achieve our vision.

Inclusive

We respect everyone, build networks, and act collaboratively.

Genuine

We are honest with others, we seek feedback, and we reflect on ourselves.

Determined

We stay on course, we set the right pace, and we don't give up.

Effective

We use evidence and innovation to find what works and get things done.

What we will do

We will stand with and work with sector partners in the NHS, local authorities, integrated care systems, regulators, policymakers, frontline practitioners, and people with lived experience to:

- Increase public and policy engagement with the mental health sector, including social work as an employment option of choice.
- Identify research and innovation to co-produce workforce solutions.
- Plug the gap between demand and supply in the mental health workforce.
- Create an entrepreneurial outlook and commercial mindset to support our social purpose and increase our impact.

Our objectives

We will:

Create and embed an extended programme of workforce development and career pathways in health and social care to have a broader impact on the future and sustainability of the mental health workforce, through research and evidence, building on our learning, knowledge, sector skills and expertise.

Continue to deliver, improve, and extend our flagship mental health social work programme to make sure that social workers are at the heart of mental health services and to ensure that everyone has access to a dedicated and inspired workforce.

Enhance our external relationships to shape and influence workforce policy and practice, model excellence and become the delivery partner of choice for mental health workforce policymakers and providers.

Put our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and listening to the voices of people with lived experience at the heart of everything we do.

Develop our organisational effectiveness to increase positive impact in the mental health sector, contributing to excellence in service provision and support for people with mental health issues.

How we will do it

Think Ahead's aim is to **recruit, train and promote** the mental health workforce to enable the most effective support to people experiencing mental health problems.

We will work in **partnership** drawing insight and expertise from partners in the NHS, local authorities, integrated care systems, workforce development sector partners, frontline practitioners, and people with lived experience to:

1. **Design** workforce solutions to recruit, train, develop and retain skills and experience in the mental health sector.
2. **Deliver** those solutions directly.
3. **Disseminate knowledge** and drive adoption of those solutions.

We will:

- Put people with lived experience at the heart of everything we do.
- Ensure that our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion in the mental health workforce drives our decision-making.
- Engage with and enhance the impact of our mental health social work alumni to inform our agenda for change and development.
- Develop relationships and engage with our audiences (regulators, policymakers, government, educators and employers) conferences and events, to help to shape new opportunities to support the mental health workforce in social work and social care.
- Seek funding for baseline research and benchmarking in mental health social work and wider health and social care roles.

Join with us

We stand with the mental health sector: our partners, practitioners and the people who use services. The professionals who work in mental health or associated services need support and resources urgently to be able to do the job they love.

We can only build a thriving mental health workforce fit for the future if we work together. We want to hear about your experience, your ideas, your insights. If you are interested in working with or engaging with Think Ahead, we would love to hear from you.

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thinkahead.org

