



Impact Report 2023



2023 in numbers

We work to ensure people living with mental health needs have access to the right support, at the right time.

8,490

people with mental health needs supported by our social workers¹.

£8.5m

worth of mental health workforce training and development delivered.

136

trainees qualified as social workers specialising in mental health².

151

new social worker trainees started our programme.

27%

identify as being black, Asian and from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

20%

identify as men³.

28%

were eligible for free school meals growing up⁴.

53%

are the first generation in their family to go to university⁴.

1. This figure includes the number of people supported by our 2021 and 2022 Classes.

2. From our Class of 2022.

3. Men are under-represented in social work and wider mental health services. We therefore proactively seek to recruit more men into the sector.

4. We analyse these numbers to map social mobility and inclusivity through our programme.

We stand with the mental health sector, working in partnership with our community:

13

**members of our
Service User and Carer
Reference Group.**

40

**NHS trusts & local
authority training
partners.**

69

**consultant social workers and
associate consultant social workers.**

1

**academic partner,
Middlesex University.**

738

**mental health social
workers enrolled in our
Alumni Community.**

Message from the CEO



Since we launched our first programme cohort in 2016, we have welcomed and trained nearly 1,000 new mental health social workers. Joining from all walks of life and backgrounds, they share one motivation: to support people by bringing a social approach to mental health services.

Without our programme, many of them would not have embarked on a career in social work. Now, many of them are leaders in it. And, together with their colleagues, they're making a difference each to people's lives each and every day.

They have dedicated their careers to helping others, but the ongoing health and social care workforce crisis is taking its toll on practitioners and people who use services. Under resourced and overstretched, the workforce crisis affects us all.

We cannot ignore the 1.2 million people stuck on mental health waiting lists⁵, the focus on crisis intervention instead of prevention, or the millions of people left without the right support.

We have to stop taking our professionals for granted. I'm passionate about building a thriving workforce that's empowered to give people the support they need and deserve.

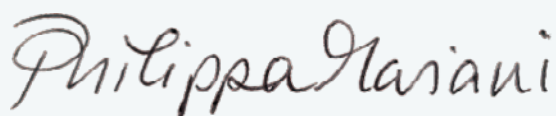
5. <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/mental-health-pressures-data-analysis>

That is why we published our manifesto: Workforce Matters this year. The mental health workforce needs urgent transformation. We need to grow, invest and connect the workforce to achieve better experiences for people living with mental health needs and practitioners alike.

I'm also proud to have launched our 2023 – 2028 strategy: an ambitious and growing plan to transform the mental health workforce. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the mental health sector and will utilise our expertise to support and advocate for the workforce.

We recognise that to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the country, we need to transform the whole system, tackling housing, education, employment, and that means every sector and every government department coming to the table to prioritise mental health. That is why we have pledged our support Centre for Mental Health's A Mentally Healthier Nation 10-year plan.

Times remain tough and our pursuit of a society where people with mental health needs can live the life they want and deserve is more important than ever.



Philippa Mariani
CEO

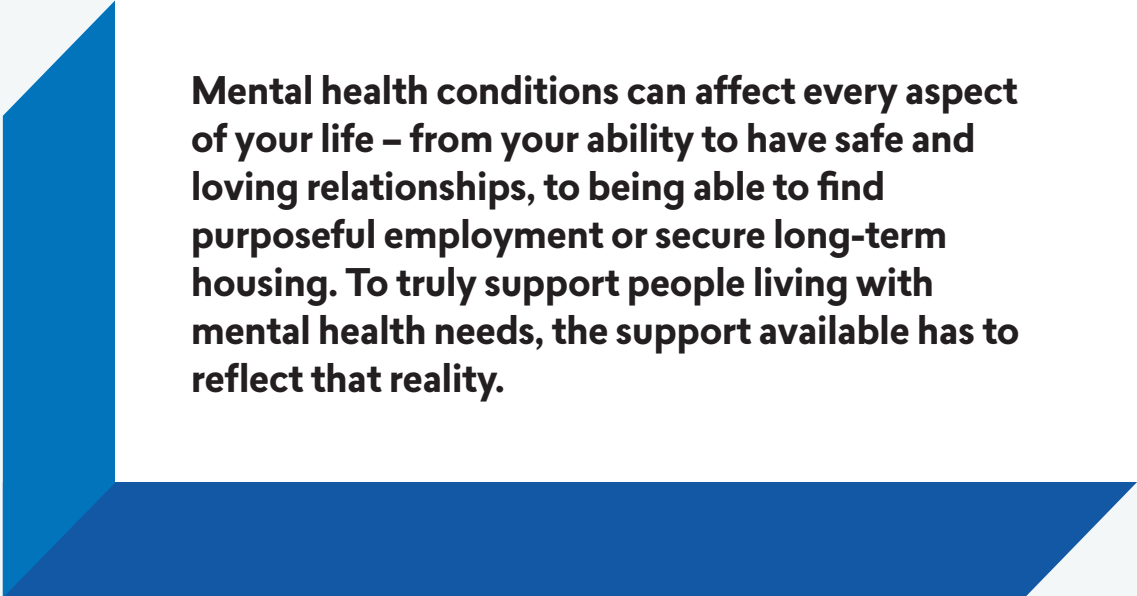
Our work

We believe everyone living with mental health needs should be empowered to live the life they want through social support as well as medical care.

To achieve this we need a thriving mental health workforce.

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

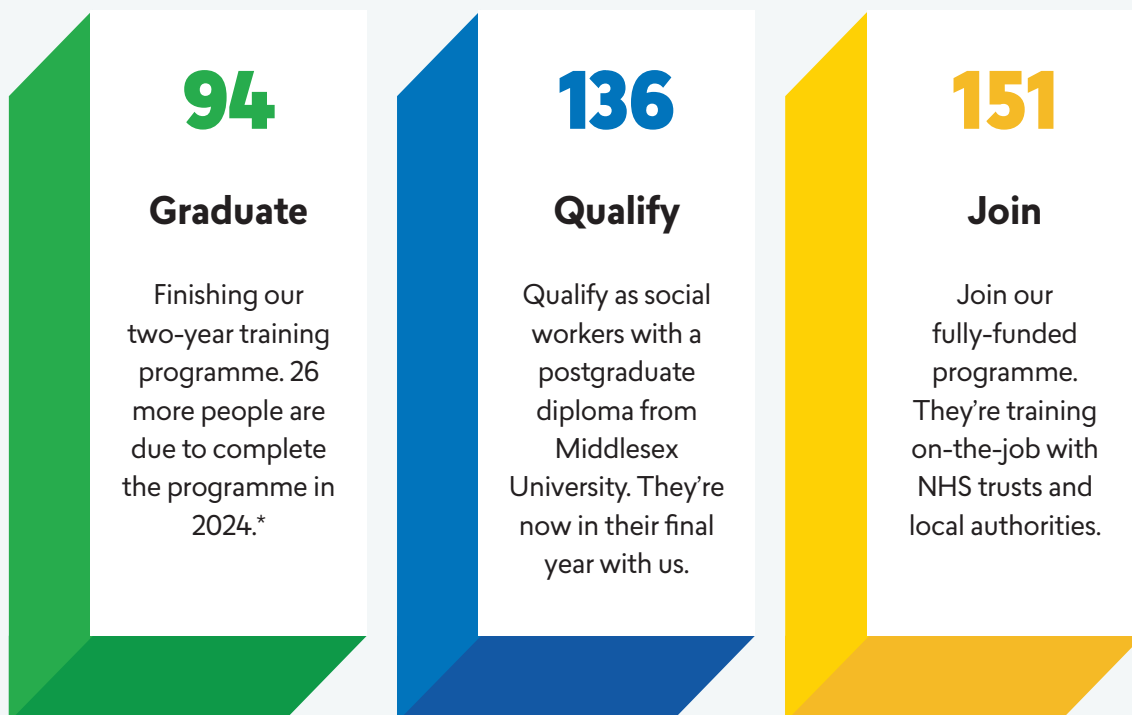
We do this directly, through our flagship training programme, and in partnership with organisations across the sector.



Mental health conditions can affect every aspect of your life – from your ability to have safe and loving relationships, to being able to find purposeful employment or secure long-term housing. To truly support people living with mental health needs, the support available has to reflect that reality.

Our flagship programme

One year, three cohorts



Each year our fully-funded, two-year programme, recruits and trains up to 160 specialist mental health social workers. Combining academic learning with on-the-job experience, our trainees make a difference to people's lives right from the very start of their time with us.

After five weeks of intensive training at Middlesex University, they join adult mental health teams in NHS trusts and local authorities across England. There they work with people who are living with severe and long-lasting mental health needs, under the supervision of a dedicated consultant social worker.

*Our cohort class sizes have doubled since this year group finished their training with us.

Standing side by side with the people they're supporting, mental health social workers support them to manage the things that matter to us all: our homes, our relationships, our work, and our finances.



It's fantastic to actually be in a position to offer support and help people.

Ben, Think Ahead Social Worker



I love the fact that there are so many ways I can help someone, and how I support one person might be completely different to the next.

Laura, Think Ahead Alumni



Social work is a privilege. We offer a safe space to people while guiding them to make choices to live the life they want and deserve.

Catherine Andrews, Think Ahead Practice Specialist

Continuing professional development

Consultant social workers and associate social workers

In 2023, we had 69 consultant and associate consultant social workers leading our first-year trainees through their placements.

Working with us, these consultant and associate consultant social workers receive fully-funded continuing professional development opportunities including:

- **BASW's Practice Educator** accredited training course Professional Standards 2020, or the opportunity to refresh their knowledge and skills if they already have a similar qualification.
- **Relationship based practice training** to develop their expertise in evidence-based social interventions.
- **Bespoke development days** offering practice-based leadership training for new practice educators and advanced relational leadership training for those returning to the role.
- **Enrolment into our Alumni Community**, offering a space to learn and grow, with access to training and events.



I have learnt a lot and will be actively thinking of how I can bring this learning to my unit and in the wider teams.

Consultant social worker, commenting on one of our development days in 2023.

22

**new
practice educators**

Completing their Practice Education Professional Standards training, these professionals can now contribute to mental health workforce training for higher education institutions.

14

**continuing
practice educators**

Completing their refresher training, these professionals have re-affirmed their Practice Education Professional Standards qualifications.

69

consultant and associate consultant social workers

5

**relationship based
practice days**

Delivered in partnership with Middlesex University, these focused on key social interventions including motivational interviewing, connecting people and systemic family interventions.

7

**development
days**

Counting towards Continuing Professional Development training, topics ranged from inclusive practice, to ethical leadership in practice education and compassionate leadership in social work.

Alumni Community

The support we offer our trainees does not end when they finish our programme. Our growing Alumni Community offers a space for newly qualified social workers and experienced practitioners alike to come together, to learn from and support one another.

The community provides professional opportunities, training and development, supporting our alumni to continue long and impactful careers in mental health.

This year members of our Alumni Community were involved in:

- **The peer mentoring programme**, with alumni mentoring second year trainees, offering personal development for themselves whilst supporting their mentees.
- **External relations activity**, contributing to policy responses, research and written pieces, using their frontline perspectives to advocate for the social approach in mental health.
- **The attraction and selection of new trainees** to our flagship programme. Many speak at recruitment events and contribute to marketing activity, and several are now trained assessors actively contributing to our assessment days.
- **Monthly guided reflective practice sessions** and a range of events and trainings including our new neurodiversity series which we are running in collaboration with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Neurodivergent Special Interest Group.
- **We also have alumni representation in our Board of Trustees**, and they have continued to influence our strategic direction and ongoing work.

Wider support for the mental health workforce

We work in partnership with organisations across the sector to support the workforce and people living with mental health needs.

Helping bring specialist support to job seekers living with mental health needs.

Commissioned by NHS England earlier this year, we have partnered with Social Finance to bring specialist support to job seekers living with mental health needs.

Open to anyone using mental health services who wants to work, Individual Placement Support helps people find a job that's right for them with the assistance of an employment specialist. And, through ongoing in-work support for both the employee and their employer, the intervention helps foster an accepting, rewarding and healthy working environment.

Whilst some people may not be able or ready to work, many people want to work and find opportunities that suit their needs and personal goals for the future. This service is a valuable resource for people and we are pleased to be bringing our recruitment and workforce expertise to support it.



My employment specialist made me feel like I could do it, and then I did! I'm now working as a Curriculum Assistant in maths & statistics at a local university.

I LOVE my new job because I get to learn new skills, like coding. I'm also working with a very supportive manager and feel really welcomed & integrated into my new team.

Returning to work has made me feel a lot better. I am more settled and a lot calmer, and it feels like I have one less thing to worry about."

Paulette⁶

Many of the Individual Placement Support service providers are small charities. We are working with them to strengthen their capabilities: driving recruitment strategy development; helping with raising awareness of the service and employment specialist role itself; and delivering training on staff retention and key recruitment activities – including advertising, social media, events, and partnership management.

6. You can read Paulette's story and the experiences of other people who've used IPS services on the Central and North West London website: <https://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/patients-and-carers/employment-services/recovery-stories>

The pan-London NHS Trust Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme.

Created in partnership with East London NHS Foundation Trust and social work leads across London, the programme supports early career development skills, knowledge and professional confidence for mental health workers across the capital.

Set up in October 2021, the programme continues to develop and grow.

- To date, 34 newly qualified social workers have completed the programme.
- 32 more are currently enrolled in it with East London NHS Foundation Trust, West London NHS Trust, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, and Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust.
- The programme training is also being accessed by Isle of Wight NHS Trust, Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust and Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

Advocacy

Mental health services in England received a record 4.6 million referrals last year with the number of people in contact with mental health services increasing⁷. Yet, while the level of need continues to grow, there is a workforce crisis across our mental health services.

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

Our charity advocates for the workforce to better support people living with mental health needs. Our close relationship with new mental health social workers and their employers, alongside our wider work in the sector, gives us extensive insight into the urgent challenges facing the workforce, and the impact they are having on service delivery.

And it is that insight which we use to inform and influence national policy, sharing the knowledge and expertise of our trainees, alumni, Service User and Carer Reference Group, and key stakeholders.



What struck me about becoming a service user was that it wasn't the theories or the interventions that I came away remembering, it was the felt experience. Did I feel heard? Did I feel cared for? Did I feel empathy?

Rebecca, one of our Service User and Carer Reference Group members reflects on her journey from social worker to service user and expert by experience.

7. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/119822/pdf/#:~:text=Mental%20health%20services%20in%20>

This year we:

- **Developed our manifesto, Workforce Matters, ahead of the expected 2024 general election**, outlining the action needed from any incoming government to properly equip the mental health workforce.
- **Responded to the Department of Health and Social Care's care workforce pathway consultation, and the major conditions strategy consultation.** Our submissions were developed through interviews and surveys with mental health practitioners and service users.
- **Attended the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Party Conferences**, joining with others from the sector to advocate for investment and prioritisation of the mental health workforce.
- **Conducted bespoke research on the expansion of social work apprenticeships** for the Department of Health and Social Care.
- **Contributed to several panel events.** Our CEO, Philippa Mariani, spoke about the workforce crisis at the Mental Health Annual Conference. And our Lead Practice Specialist, Jacqui Bell spoke about the role of social work and mental health services in supporting addiction services at the Westminster Social Policy Forum policy conference.
- **Actively supported advocacy campaigns across the sector.** We can only build a thriving mental health workforce fit for the future if we work together. We've backed campaigns from BASW, Centre for Mental Health and Rethink Mental Illness, sharing our support for more action to bolster the workforce and improve the support available to people living with mental health needs.

Looking ahead

We need a strong and thriving workforce if we are to truly support people living with mental health needs.

Yet the reality is that our dedicated, passionate health and social care professionals are overburdened and under resourced. With vacancy rates at an all-time high, rising from 7% to 10.7% in social care alone last year⁸, investment in the workforce must be prioritised.

We are committed to finding cost-effective and impactful solutions that will make a difference for people with mental health needs and the workforce supporting them.

We will continue our work to recruit, train and promote the mental health workforce. Bringing insights from our community into national policy discussions and embedding lived experience into our work, to build a thriving workforce.

8. King's Fund (2023) Social care 360, London.

Available online: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/social-care-360/workforce-and-carers>



**To find out more about our
work please visit our website
thinkahead.org or click through
to follow us on social media.**



The Think Ahead Organisation is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee.
Charity number: 1166577. Company number: 10015893.