

New recruitment drive to help 10,000 people with serious mental illness

- Up to 480 mental health social workers will be recruited and trained – with applications open today (29 September)
- More than 10,000 people living with serious mental illness will receive support

More than 10,000 people living with serious mental illness will receive support from 480 new mental health social workers, thanks to a £27 million funding boost for the charity Think Ahead.

The new funding – which has been welcomed by mental health charity Mind – will help recruit and train a new wave of mental health social workers, who will form a vital part of the response to coronavirus. Applications for the graduate places have opened today.

The recruits are trained to provide psychological and practical support to help people with serious mental illness, such as severe depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and address issues such as relationships, housing and employment, which can have a huge bearing on mental wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health – and recent research suggests that those with pre-existing mental health conditions are at greater risk of significant, long-term negative effects.

This new funding will give the most vulnerable the support they need by expanding the Think Ahead programme by 60% – from 100 trainees each year to 160 – training up to 480 new mental health social workers across England over the next 3 years.

Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Nadine Dorries said:

The impact of the pandemic on those with pre-existing mental health conditions could be significant and long lasting.

The NHS, local services and charities have done an excellent job in being there to support those who have needed help throughout the pandemic, but it is vital that we ensure our services are fit to meet ongoing demand.

By expanding the mental health workforce this new funding will boost support for the most vulnerable at a time when they need it most.

Think Ahead Chief Executive, Ella Joseph, said:

We are delighted to be able to train hundreds more social workers,

who will play a key part in the nation's mental health recovery from coronavirus.

The pandemic has shown us more than ever that social factors like isolation, relationships, finances and living arrangements have profound impacts on mental health – social workers are uniquely placed to help people with severe mental health problems to address issues like these.

The Think Ahead programme offers talented graduates and those looking to change career a paid route into frontline mental health services, run by the NHS and local authorities, with training delivered on the job in partnership with Middlesex University.

The programme, which began in 2016, has been a huge success, and so far has recruited over 500 mental health social workers. It is recognised in the Times Top 100 Graduate Employers list as one of the top 40 graduate schemes in the country, and receives more than 30 applications for each place.

Applications for the 2021 intake have opened today, with the selection process focusing on the motivation and skills to make a difference to vulnerable people.

Paul Farmer, Chief Executive of Mind, said:

It's great to see further funding for Think Ahead. The programme is supporting people who want to become mental health social workers and change the lives of people who experience serious mental health problems.

People's social circumstances – such as their finances, living arrangements and relationships – are crucial to good mental health. That has become even more clear this year as the coronavirus has had a deep impact on many people's lives.

Claire Murdoch, NHS England's National Director of Mental Health Director, said:

Expanding mental health care for patients, including by boosting our workforce, is an important priority for the NHS so it's absolutely good news that the Think Ahead programme is being enhanced, recognising that its trainees have already supported thousands of people across dozens of NHS mental health trusts in England.

Mental health social workers have a vital role to play in helping to ensure that people receive the mental health and care support they need, as the NHS continues to deliver care to people who need it, as we have done throughout the pandemic.

Think Ahead

Think Ahead is an independent charity. Its flagship graduate programme, funded by the Department of Health and Social Care, offers talented graduates and career-changers a route to train on the job as mental health social workers.

To date the charity has recruited more than 500 new entrants for over 60% of England's NHS mental health trusts and 30% of local authorities, across every region of England.

Today's announcement

Think Ahead has been awarded a contract for up to £27 million from DHSC:

- This contract will fund at least 2 more intakes of the 2-year programme, starting in summer 2021 and summer 2022, and costing just over £9 million each. The contract includes an optional extension to a third intake
- Each intake will recruit and train up to 160 social workers. This is a 60% increase in size, as previous intakes each took around 100 participants
- We estimate that recruits from the first 2 intakes (i.e. those guaranteed by the contract) will support at least 10,000 service users by 2025. This is a conservative estimate based on average numbers of service users that participants from our previous intakes have worked with

The impact of mental health problems

Mental illness affects 1 in 4 adults in England each year. It has the same effect on life expectancy as smoking, and overall costs the UK over £100 billion a year in healthcare and lost productivity. See [more information on the national scale and effects of mental illness](#).

How the Think Ahead programme works

Think Ahead participants undergo an intensive 2-year programme that blends on-the-job experience with academic learning and leadership training. Participants become qualified after their first year on the programme, and complete a master's degree during their second year.

Financial support

In the first year, participants receive a tax-free training bursary of £17,200 outside London or £19,100 inside London. In the second year, they are employed as a newly qualified social worker and receive a taxable salary. This will typically range from £21,000 to £33,000, depending on location.

Academic qualifications

Middlesex University leads Think Ahead's teaching and curriculum (and awards

the degrees to participants).

Selection process

Applicants must have (or be on course for) a 2:1 undergraduate degree in any subject. Candidates who meet the academic criteria go through a rigorous 3-stage assessment process focused on 7 key attributes, which includes a role-play social work situation and an interview with someone who uses mental health services.