



MONEY AND
MENTAL HEALTH
POLICY INSTITUTE

"It is too easy to spiral into debt when suffering with mental illness"

"Make companies listen and act responsibly"

THE MONEY AND MENTAL HEALTH MANIFESTO

Ten steps to boost mental health and financial wellbeing for Britain

Introduction

Mental health policy has had a meteoric rise, from a rarely discussed issue to a vote-winning election pledge in just a few years. But while there has, rightly, been a clear focus on how we treat mental health problems, much less has been done to prevent them in the first place, or to support people to live well despite them. This is the next step, to build fences at the top of the cliff rather than parking ambulances at the bottom. This election is an opportunity to build on all parties' stated commitments to tackle poverty, disadvantage and inequality: to stop financial difficulty driving more people into mental health services, and to stop those with mental health problems ending up in problem debt due to a lack of support.

All the major parties have made commitments that show they want to make change happen for people affected by mental health problems or financial worry. The Conservatives want to help the 'just managing' and right the 'everyday injustices that those with mental illness encounter'. The Labour party want to help people 'pushed to the brink as they find it difficult to get by'. The Liberal Democrats want a 'new deal' for the NHS and social care to tackle the 'perpetual crisis'. And the SNP want to tackle 'the root causes of poverty and deprivation'.

This manifesto sets out our proposals for the next government to deliver on these promises, and finally break the link between financial difficulty and mental health problems. We developed these policies in consultation with our research community - a growing movement of more than 2000 consumers with mental health problems backing our work and sharing their lived experience with policy makers. The quotes below are from these committed and passionate volunteers who share our vision of a fairer society.

We urge politicians of every party to include all ten policies in their manifesto, and make them a reality if elected.

1. Stop charges for the doctors' notes people need to prove to creditors they have a mental health problem, and get help resolving their debts.

In January, the Prime Minister committed to work to stop doctors and mental health professionals charging people in serious debt for medical evidence they need to qualify for financial help. Charges of up to £150 for the "Debt and Mental Health Evidence Form" are levied on up to a third of people in debt crisis who need it, slowing down their recovery from their mental health problem and often causing financial chaos. We now urge all parties to take forward this policy process if elected, end these unfair charges and boost mental health recovery by helping people escape debt crisis.

"When mentally ill you cannot function in day to day activity, finances become a terrible burden and it's easy to get terribly into debt which exacerbates the mental health."

2. Invest enough money to make "parity of esteem" between mental and physical health a reality - across the benefits system, the NHS and social care.

The NHS is under a legal duty to treat mental and physical health equally: but the investment to back up this ambition hasn't been delivered. Mental health services are still being cut, inpatient beds are closing, and efforts to standardise and reduce waiting times have been put on the back burner. Meanwhile the benefits system can be almost impossible to navigate for people with mental health problems, who find it harder to claim in the first place, harder to get through the assessment process, and are too often slapped with benefit sanctions because their ill health prevents them from jumping through the hoops the system requires. Disability benefits have recently been changed so that mental distress caused by leaving your home no longer counts as equal to physical pain. All this has to change, to deliver

parity not just of esteem but of care, and that will take serious investment. Every party should commit to funding in full the services we need.

“I have been waiting for eighteen months just to talk to someone. All I have had is a letter saying ‘don't worry, we haven't forgotten about you, you're still on our waiting list.’”

3. Ensure tougher regulation across financial services, energy, water, telecoms and retail to protect vulnerable consumers, like those with mental health problems

In Britain today, market regulators expect consumers to be “active” - to shop around for the best deal and complain when things go wrong. But during periods of poor mental health, that can be impossible. All our regulators need to take a tougher stance, so the most vulnerable customers are no longer routinely subsidising services for everyone else. Billing needs to be simpler; switching needs to be easier, and automated for those who really need help; and when people face cognitive or psychological barriers to being active, engaged consumers, both regulators and firms must take steps to level the playing field and provide appropriate support. Across the board, debt collection practices - including by government - need to make sure they don't push people with mental health problems into crisis.

“Constant racking up of charges, being threatened with debt companies and bailiffs does not help. It worsens the situation and further impacts the illness and therefore the individual. The constant downward spiral feels impossible to fight against. Make companies listen and act responsibly with respect and consideration.”

4. Make better budgeting support and money advice available for people with mental health problems who are dependent on benefits.

The new benefits system - Universal Credit - will require almost everyone to wait six weeks before receiving any money, and manage rent payments, budgeting and bills alone. This can be incredibly difficult for those with mental health problems, which often seriously affect people's financial capability. It is vital to offer those on low incomes, and in particular, those with mental health conditions, more support and assistance with managing their money, and cancel plans for this unfair six week wait. Reducing the stress of financial management for those on low incomes would have a significant impact on wellbeing, and help more people recover more swiftly from mental ill health and get back to work.

“When in the middle of a crisis, it's impossible to get dressed or prepare food or do basic personal care, dealing with bills and benefits was much beyond my ability to concentrate and organise.”

5. Conduct a major review of Power of Attorney legislation and the rules for carers helping their loved ones with money matters, to better protect people with mental health problems from financial harm

Nearly a million people in the UK care for someone with a mental health problem, and often this means helping out with budgeting, paying bills and managing money. But the system can be a nightmare for carers. Without fair rules in place to help carers, people open themselves up to abuse by sharing PIN numbers and bank login details. We need a comprehensive review of how Power of Attorney works across the UK, making it better fit the needs of people with mental health problems, and making sure carers with these

powers in place can use them, simply and easily. And all carers need to get a better service from banks, utilities, landlords and lenders when they're stepping in to help out.

"Partners and families of those with mental health suffer greatly and their plight is not recognised by anyone."

6. Guarantee 'breathing space' for people with serious debt problems, where creditors can't enforce payment or charge interest, to reduce stress and anxiety.

'Breathing space' is a set of protections proposed by many debt charities, to give people in problem debt a 12 month window where interest and other charges on the debt are frozen, and the creditor is not allowed to take enforcement action, or to petition for bankruptcy. We back this campaign, which would give people with mental health problems across the UK a chance to focus on their mental health recovery, without the stress and anxiety of being chased for unpayable debts - just as is currently the case in Scotland.

"I was unable to function and make rational decisions... I could not manage my finances let alone daily life matters. The financial services industry need to be under a statutory duty where a person has identified mental health has a cooling off period of 6-12 months."

7. Make money and benefits advice available through the NHS alongside mental health treatment for all those who are struggling with their finances

People with financial problems are up to four times less likely to recover from a mental health problem in 18 months. Debt and financial stress act as a dead-weight, holding back recovery. Comprehensive mental health

treatment needs to make sure these kinds of drags on recovery are cleared away, giving people the best chance at restoring their mental health. Across the UK's national health services, people with mental health conditions should be asked if they're struggling to pay the bills - and those who are, should be systematically referred on to debt and welfare advice. In England, the government should start by funding a pilot and evaluation of debt advice within the IAPT talking therapies service.

"There needs to be a more joined up approach between the NHS, benefits system and therapeutic services to provide a holistic system of support for mental illness. I believe that removing the worry of financial hardship would significantly help with people's recovery."

8. Crack down on high-cost credit - like logbook loans, unauthorised overdrafts and catalogue credit - and improve protections for customers with mental health problems

People with mental health problems are significantly more likely to be in arrears on high-cost credit products than those without. Whether it's unauthorised overdrafts, catalogue credit or rent-to-own shops on the high street selling furniture and appliances, it's vulnerable consumers who use these kinds of credit most, and who suffer real harm. The regulator needs to take a stronger line against abuse by these firms. Price bundling, which makes it hard to understand the real cost of credit, should be stamped out. Affordability assessments should be required across the sector. And consumers with mental health problems need particular protection, especially from aggressive collection techniques.

"Stop credit cards companies and payday loans etc offering ridiculous amounts of credit to people who can't afford to pay the required payments, this can often end up with very unfortunate results."

9. Require industry to produce new tools to help people protect themselves online from addictive and damaging services and marketing - like gambling, apps and games or impulse shopping

Our research shows people with mental health problems can find it hard to navigate today's 'always-on' gambling, gaming and internet shopping industries. We need to empower people, especially those living with insomnia, substance misuse, or struggling with impulse control, to build a more positive online environment for themselves. People need new tools to help them shut off adverts for, and access to, products and services they find addictive - whether that's auction sites, shopping, gambling, premium phone lines or mobile games with expensive in-app purchases. Government should press industry to build these tools - or regulate them more tightly if they won't act.

"Poor mental health is often associated with feeling lonely and isolated so sitting at home night after night has led me to spending away on the Internet. I'm living beyond my means and racking up credit card debt."

10. Fund a major data study of pathways into financial difficulty and financial behaviour of consumers with mental health problems, so companies can build tools that better protect people

Our research shows people's financial behaviour can change dramatically when they experience poor mental health. But to really help people protect themselves, we need to better understand the details of how people spend, pay bills, and navigate the financial services landscape. The government should fund a major study of consumer data, looking at the impact of mental health conditions in particular, to understand the causes of financial difficulty and what we can do about it. Armed with this understanding, the next government could make bold steps in consumer policy, setting braver ambitions and clearer direction to make sure regulators can protect and empower vulnerable consumers, making markets fairer and millions of Britons better off.

"More emphasis should be put on research and on preventing problems with early intervention."

The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute is an independent charity, committed to breaking the link between financial difficulty and mental health problems. We conduct research, develop practical policy solutions and work in partnership with both those providing services and those using them to find what really works. www.moneyandmentalhealth.org

"Money... can feel like life &
death for those who struggle."

