

Open Letter on the Failings of NHS Talking Therapies

Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB

We are members of the Mental Health Action group, a collaboration of Keep Our NHS Public and the Socialist Health Association members campaigning to improve NHS mental health services. Our group comprises current and retired NHS psychotherapists and psychiatrists, social workers, mental health service users and carers.

We are concerned that NHS Talking Therapies is a failing service, shielded behind a propaganda campaign of innovation, effectiveness and success. In fact, it is inefficient, ineffective and has consistently failed to meet the three main targets required of it by government.

There is a growing crisis of mental ill-health in the UK, with ever-more people suffering common mental health distress. At the same time, the NHS Long Term Plan includes promises to reorganise community mental health services.¹ For both reasons, we argue it is now time for a critical review of the primary care psychological therapies currently being provided by the NHS in England.

We are therefore writing to ICBs in England including heads of Talking Therapy services, as well as healthcare scrutiny committees, campaigners and local press, pointing to the failures of the service and consequent injury to people suffering mental health distress within their catchment areas.

We would like to hear back from you in response to the concerns and questions we outline below.

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Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire and Luton Talking Therapies

1. NHS Talking Therapies (NHSTT) has an exceptionally high drop-out rate

According to NHSTT annual performance data,² across England as a whole only a third of all referrals completed a course of therapy in 2023-4.

Despite regular reports and academic papers on the dramatic failure of the service to meet the needs of its referrals, most recently the Nuffield Trust's report *Does the NHS talking therapies service have an attrition problem*³, there has been no improvement year in year out.⁴

In 2023-24 in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB's NHSTT services, only one third of the total number of 35,440 referrals and less than one half of the 25,710 who started therapy actually **finished** a course of treatment. Two-thirds of the people who applied for primary care talking therapies in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes dropped out.

Question 1: Why is the drop out rate so high?

Question 2: What happens to the 23,800 people in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes who are looking for help but drop out of the service?

2. Talking Therapies meets none of its NHS targets

The NHS Long Term Plan⁵ (currently under revision) gives Talking Therapies (TT) three targets on *access, waiting times and recovery*.

- Give access to 25% of the 'adult community prevalence' of common mental health disorders (CMD) by 2023-24, a total of 1.9m people nationally.
- 75% of people asking for therapy should have their first treatment session within six weeks.
- 50% of referrals should recover.

The service meets none of these targets:

- The adult community prevalence of Common Mental Health Disorders in the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB area was around 160,000 in 2021. NHSTT gave access to 25,710 adults in 2023-24, i.e. 16% of the prevalence – well below the 25% target. And only 3% of the prevalence actually completed treatment and recovered.
- In the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes area, Talking Therapies apparently met the 75% waiting time target in 2023-24 of a maximum 6 weeks. However, the average wait between the first and second session was 48 days by which time half its referrals had dropped out. 5,335 of the remainder waited over 6 weeks for a second session.
- The recovery rate for Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB in 2023-24 was 43% of people who completed a course of treatment. However, the more meaningful statistic is for the recovery rate of people who entered treatment - 20%.

Question 3: Why does NHS TT claim to meet its required targets when the claim is untrue?

Question 4: Why does it measure recovery in relation to completed treatment rather than treatment entry?

3. NHS Talking Therapies is not cost-effective

Evidence of the cost of NHS TT sessions is not in the public domain as far as we are able to find. It is difficult then to assess the efficiency of the service in comparison to any alternatives. There is no independent audit of the service, no accountability to CQC scrutiny for example.

In 2023-24, the annual TT funding for Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes was £14.3 million (<https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/nhs-mental-health-dashboard/>). The average duration of a session that year was 60 minutes, and for a finished course of treatment 398 minutes or 6.6 sessions. If we divide the spend by the number of people who finished a course of treatment (25,710), the cost per session was around £185.

If we use this admittedly crude measure, NHS TT's claim to cost efficiency doesn't hold water. There are over 350 qualified practitioners based in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes who are currently offering counselling and psychotherapy for under £50 per session. By this comparison £185 could buy each patient three or four times the number of sessions. (See <https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/>)

Question 5: Why is there no independent audit of the TT service?

Question 6: What is the average cost of a completed course of treatment?

4. One size doesn't fit all – the denial of care

NHS TT provides variations of a single psychological theory and practice – cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Its therapies are short-term and offer technique rather than a relationship; a didactic rather than a therapeutic process. NHS CBT has been adapted to the requirements of measuring costs and targets, standardisation of practice and data collection, efficient through-put and the prioritisation of utilitarian values.

Online therapy along with mental health apps is increasingly replacing face-to-face contact, embedding the more utilitarian and non-relational qualities of CBT-based talking therapies.

Clients are “directed” how to think, and for many the approach will either not make a connection, or will fail to travel deeply enough to carry meaning - hence the drop-out rates.

Noticeably, on the issue of short-termism and lack of depth, Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes offered little diversity of type of therapy - CBT, guided self-help by book, and Counselling for Depression. The average course of therapy consisted of 6.6 sessions. For low intensity work by Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners, the average was between 2 and 3 sessions. One third of referrals who finished a course of therapy experienced either no change or “reliable deterioration”.

In Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes NHS talking therapy services in the ICB area offer online talking therapy via Sivercloud, which is in partnership with US based data and cloud companies developing fully automated conversational AI therapy using millions of recorded NHS sessions. (<https://mentalhealthaction.uk/artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-nhs-talking-therapies/>)

Question 7: Why are only behavioural therapies offered by NHS TT?

Question 8: Why is there no longer term therapy available for people who need it?

5. NHS Talking Therapies fail to address inequalities of mental health care

The current service is an obstacle to responding more effectively to common mental ill-health in our diverse communities. The limitations of the service's standardised approach are demonstrated, for example, in its limited engagement with mental health inequalities around social deprivation, race and gender.

For example, while 24% of white referrals who entered therapy in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB in 2023-24 recovered, only 17% of Asian referrals recovered. .

While 52% of the least socially deprived referrals who entered therapy recovered, only 35% of the most socially deprived decile recovered.

Far more women than men access the service. In 2023-24, two thirds of all referrals in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB were women. What does this imply for mental health services for men?

Question 9: What is Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB doing about mental health inequalities in its area of responsibility?

Question 10: What plans does the ICB have to attune its TT services to the needs of its different communities and constituencies?

¹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6866387fe6557c544c74db7a/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england.pdf>

² Unless otherwise noted, all statistics in this Open Letter have been compiled from the annual report on NHS Talking Therapies for 2023-24 available in the public domain from NHS Digital - <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-talking-therapies-for-anxiety-and-depression-annual-reports/2023-24>

³ <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/news-item/does-the-nhs-talking-therapies-service-have-an-attrition-problem#:~:text=Referrals>

⁴ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/psychological-therapies-annual-reports-on-the-use-of-iapt-services>