People Need People: London study calls for a relational approach to public mental health

Lived-experience-led research with 220 Londoners finds that relationships, belonging and earlier support are essential to preventing mental health crises.

New research published by Mind in London and Mind in Bexley and East Kent calls for a fundamental shift in how mental health is understood, supported and prioritised across the capital.

The report, *People Need People: A Co-Produced, Lived-Experience-Led Study of the Conditions Shaping Public Mental Health Across London*, brings together the experiences of 220 people. The study was funded by the Mayor of London and commissioned by Thrive LDN, London's public mental health partnership.

Conducted between March and June 2026, the study engaged 150 survey respondents, 24 lived-experience interviewees, 29 focus group participants and 10 strategic stakeholders. Alongside this, seven people with lived experience of mental health challenges worked as co-researchers in designing, delivering and interpreting the study.

The central finding of the study is that human connection, belonging and relationships are fundamental to good mental health and must be treated as essential parts of London's public mental health system.

Feedback from participants shows that mental health is shaped long before someone reaches a crisis. Pressures such as financial insecurity, housing issues, insecure work, caring responsibilities, discrimination, poor physical health and loneliness accumulate over time and wear people down. Highlighting the need for earlier intervention, one research participant explained that "people need somewhere to go before they reach breaking point."

When individuals do try to access support, the process of seeking help can become a form of emotional labour, the study found. Participants described the difficulty of navigating fragmented services and having to retell their stories while already experiencing distress. Reflecting on this experience, one focus group participant noted: "It's circular, and even talking about it is making me a bit unwell to be honest."

The study demonstrates that effective prevention extends well beyond specialist clinical services. It is found in practical help, welcoming community spaces, meaningful activity, financial security and everyday social connection. Participants emphasised how much it matters to be listened to, recognised and remembered, noting that peer support, volunteering, faith groups and neighbourhood communities play a vital role in helping people cope and recover.

To help organisations put these insights into practice, the report introduces a Relational Model of Public Mental Health. The model was developed by Dr David Palmer, who led the study and designed its methodology, and was refined with lived-experience contributors.

The report sets out seven recommendations, which include:

- Shifting investment towards earlier, community-based support.
- Designing services around the needs of people and how they live their lives.
- Embedding paid lived-experience leadership in commissioning decisions.
- Measuring outcomes such as belonging, trust and hope alongside standard service performance.

A lived-experience co-researcher on the project, said: Being involved in this research as a co-researcher has reinforced how important it is that people feel listened to and valued when accessing mental health support. What stood out to me was the recognition that mental health is shaped by so much more than clinical services alone; relationships, belonging and human connection can make a real difference to people's wellbeing. It has been a valuable experience to help bring lived experiences to the forefront of this research, and I hope the findings encourage a more connected and preventative approach to mental health support across London.

Reflecting on the findings, Dr David Palmer, the project's lead researcher and CEO at Mind in Bexley and East Kent, said: "People told us they knew things were going wrong long before any service did, and that what caught them was a neighbour, a peer, a volunteer, someone at the library or the faith group. Relationships like these do most of the preventive work in London's mental health system, yet we have never funded or measured them as such.

"The people who shaped this research have lived what it describes. The task now is to design services and investment around what they already know keeps people well."

David was also recently appointed as Chair of Mind in London and is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Commenting on the research, Lucy Dodd, Strategic Lead, Mind in London, said: "This research reinforces something local Minds see every day: people's mental health cannot be separated from the circumstances in which they live or the relationships and communities around them. As London develops new approaches to neighbourhood health, lived experience and the expertise of local community organisations must be central to those decisions."

People Need People is a public mental health research project delivered through a co-produced approach with Mind in London and Mind in Bexley and East Kent. The qualitative, mixed-methods study designed to explore lived experience in depth, rather than act as a statistically representative survey of London's population.

Explore the full report and executive summary –

People Need People Full Report

People need People Extended Executive Summary