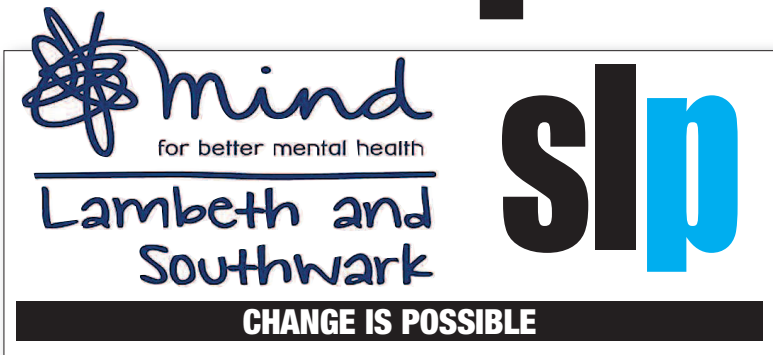


Workplace can be best place to rebuild lives



More than 95 per cent of people who are in contact with secondary care mental health services are out of work – and employers often turn their backs on applicants with a history of mental illness. Yet experts suggest that those who return to work truly value their employment and go the extra mile to excel at their job. As part of the South London Press Change Is Possible campaign, reporter Jack Dixon meets the mental health specialists providing real opportunities to help people back to work

Tokenistic, menial and unrewarding. That's how Mark Bertram remembers the limited job opportunities for people with a history of mental illness back in 1993.

Mark, a day centre manager at Tooting Bec Hospital at the time, was determined to do more.

He believed the world of work could provide real therapeutic benefits for people using mental health services while enabling them to gain the skills and confidence to secure a job.

"Many employers are reluctant to employ people in contact with mental health services because of distorted media portrayals that they can be unreliable and less productive," says Mark.

"In fact, the opposite is true. Once a person has a job, because they have been excluded and in poverty, they are more committed and value the work and their earnings greatly."

With Mark's support, a group of patients at the hospital began seeking work in the community. They quickly hit upon home cleaning as the perfect fit and launched a service in south London.

Almost 25 years later, Clean & Care is at the top of its trade. Competing with established cleaning companies, it has won a major contract with Lambeth council and received national recognition for its social value.

Thanks to the project, a team of around 20 part-time staff are now earning again. For many, it is the first time in years that they have been paid for their labour.

"These are people who are very much the forgotten members of society," says project co-ordinator Kevin Poulton.

"They have had a real hard time getting into employment because of the stigma attached to people with mental health issues and they have ended up excluded from the labour market.

"Many are lacking in confidence because they have been knocked back over the years and really don't feel they are able to do a job."

Most of the workers are referred to Clean & Care from community mental health teams or employment agencies.

Among them are highly-skilled individuals who excelled in the workplace prior to their struggles with mental health and some who

never had the opportunity to work. Key to the process is rebuilding confidence, and instilling a sense of self-worth and personal value.

Over the years many workers have used Clean & Care as a springboard to return to full-time employment and further education.

"Carpet cleaning is the type of work where you get immediate results, and that really does give people confidence very quickly," explains Kevin.

"You go into a room and an hour later it's totally transformed. That gives you a lot of job satisfaction."

Mark adds: "It's about validation, validating someone's experience. It's saying 'you have value and the work you have done has value'. It reflects the positive aspects of a person's life."

Some people can take years to regain their self-belief after a traumatic experience or a long period in hospital.

William has been earning £10 an hour with Clean & Care for the last year. He enjoyed a successful career in the construction industry and later toured around the world as a roadie for Bob Marley and David Bowie.

It was only when a succession of people in his personal life passed away that he slipped into a depressive state, began abusing drugs and found himself sleeping rough.

"Some days I feel like I want to move forward and others I feel like giving up, like I'm waiting for the end," he says. "But working makes you feel good about yourself. Doing nothing all day, you feel like you've not accomplished anything."

Vince worked as a technical assistant at a London hospital before he became depressed and was bullied at work. He had been unemployed for several years before signing up to Clean & Care – and he experienced the job search stigma first hand.

"Sometimes with employers you think, I have a feeling they are going to look at this application and dismiss it," he says. "You wonder if they saw us in the street whether they would act the same way."

Vince says earning money and building a workplace camaraderie with his new colleagues has helped him think more positively about his career.

"With depression you don't want



to do anything, that's the worst thing because it holds you back," he adds. "It's really good when you go to someone's house and do a good job. You feel like you've made a contribution, that you've helped them out."

What started off as a small project funded by a £2,000 grant has grown into one of Lambeth's greatest success stories.

While it generates its own income, Clean & Care now receives core funding from the South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust in recognition of its direct health benefits.

In 2012 the project was awarded a six-figure contract to clean Lambeth council's libraries and day centre buildings, and it has since diversified to provide office, upholstery

and domestic cleaning services.

Challenging stereotypical views about the capabilities of people who have experienced mental health difficulties remains at the heart of the initiative.

But its commercial success, Mark says, is proof that the ethical model can work for everyone.

"Back at the beginning it was really challenging, we were working with inpatients who had spent many years in hospital."

"Today a lot of the team are living in supported housing or their own homes, and while some are still living quite excluded lives, they have become more independent and are enjoying life."

"The future is brighter – we are seeing some people come into the service and within six months they are seeking full-time jobs."

For more information about Clean & Care, visit www.cleanandcare.org.uk

FACTS AND STATS

When asked how workplace stress had affected them:

- More than one in five employees (21 per cent) agreed that they had called in sick to avoid work
- 14 per cent agreed that they had resigned and 42 per cent had considered resigning
- 30 per cent of staff disagreed with the statement 'I would feel able to talk openly with my line manager if I was feeling stressed'
- 56 per cent of employers said they would like to do more to improve staff wellbeing but that they do not feel they have the right training or guidance

HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT OUR CAMPAIGN

If you would like to support our *Change Is Possible* campaign, there are several ways to get involved...

Share your story

Do you have personal experience of living with mental health problems? Has a friend or family member been affected? Your story could help inspire others to donate towards our campaign.

Help us fundraise

Could you support our appeal by organising a fundraising event or setting yourself a sponsored challenge? Every penny could be crucial in helping us reach our campaign targets.

Donate to our campaign

To make a donation to our appeal, you can visit the dedicated website www.givey.com/changeispossible Alternatively, you can write to Lambeth and Southwark Mind, 4th floor, 336 Brixton Road, London, SW9 7AA. They will be pleased to help.

- For more information about getting involved with our campaign, please contact *South London Press* reporter Jack Dixon on 07973 565078 or email him at this address: jack@londonweeklynews.co.uk



Meet some members of the team behind the success story that is Clean & Care – a company that is now 25 years old and at the top of its trade. Competing with established cleaning companies, it has won a major contract with Lambeth council and received national recognition for its social value. Thanks to the project, a team of around 20 part-time staff, some of whom are pictured here, are now earning again. For many, it is the first time in years that they have been paid for their labour



Remember, employers have a duty of care too

It is often challenging for people who have experienced mental health problems to return to the workplace – but thousands are suffering even when they secure a job.

A report by the charity Business in the Community last year revealed that 62 per cent of employees have experienced poor mental health where work was a contributing factor. It also found management structures that were ill-equipped to provide essential support.

Louise Aston, the charity's wellbeing director, explains why employers must do more to look after the mental health of their staff



If society is to be judged in the way in which it cares for the most vulnerable then business must be measured by the support it gives to employees in their hour of need. When it comes to health, employers have a duty of care concerning mental health, as well as physical ill health.

Alarmingly, our comprehensive survey of workplace mental health suggests that many companies are failing employees who suffer from poor mental health.

It is clear that thousands of employees are suffering in silence, feeling unable to share their experiences at work.

When they do reach out for support, many are met with an inadequate response. We must end this injustice.

This is why Business in the Community has formed an unprecedented alliance with our partners the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Institute of Leadership and Management, Maudsley Learning at Work, Mental Health First Aid England, Mind and The Work Foundation to transform workplace mental health.

Working together we will be a powerful force for change that will improve the lives of millions of employees and their families.

While some of our findings give cause for concern, they should be read alongside elements of progress and the inspiring stories from these progressive businesses, large and small across all sectors, which are tackling mental health directly. It is hugely encouraging to know that 76 per cent of line managers believe that wellbeing is a responsibility of their role.

Workplace mental health is a collective responsibility – by sharing what works, these ideas become embedded and real change takes place. The voices of 20,000 employees cannot be ignored.

Follow our **Change Is Possible** campaign every week in the **South London Press** and **London Weekly News**, and read all the articles published since the campaign began by visiting our website londonnewsonline.co.uk

