

Barnet residents support the strike

“MANY BARNET residents, like me, require mental health social workers to provide assessments and referrals. Long waiting lists make situations worse and place extra stress on families. Over the last three years, I went from Barnet Carers where two full time employed people each had a case load of 3,000 to waiting over 18 months for a social worker to be allocated to us. Finally we were assigned to a social worker in training. When my own health deteriorated a mental health social worker did assess my husband so care and support became available. Now I hear the service is not safe according to the professionals running it. Mental health social workers did the right thing to call on managers and officers of Barnet Council to finally face these serious matters.

Barnet resident

WHEN A family member of a good friend, badly needed help from mental health social workers, it was not possible for Barnet to provide this. Neglect and further damage from waiting, without knowing if help would ever come, was too much stress on everyone. I was working full time and had a family of my own but I felt I had to intervene. I was met with excuses or silence. I was made to feel stupid. All pathways seemed blocked, but one day a mental health social worker called and came to do an assessment that recommended respite care in a Barnet care home. It happened about eight years ago. Now things seem even worse. Mental health social workers should be rewarded and recognised as a specialist part of social work. If they have had to go on strike it makes me think they are not being listened to.

Barnet resident

I'M A Barnet resident grappling with severe mental health challenges. I stand firmly behind the strike action undertaken by our mental health social workers. The prolonged waiting lists for assistance have made it exceedingly difficult for individuals like me to access support, leading me to seek help from the charity organisation MIND. This shouldn't be the case. It's imperative to acknowledge that these social workers are also human beings who deserve a safe and supportive work environment to provide quality services to the residents of Barnet. We must recognise their tireless dedication and hard work in serving our community. Fair and equal pay is non-negotiable, particularly given the ever-rising cost of living. We must prioritise the wellbeing of these essential workers to ensure they do not suffer in silence with nowhere to turn. It's deeply disappointing that Barnet Council has chosen to disregard their basic needs. At the very least, they should engage in constructive dialogue and negotiation to address these concerns and demonstrate genuine care for their staff. Ignoring their pleas for negotiation is not just unfair to them, it hurts our whole community. We don't want our mental health heroes feeling lost and unheard. The decision to strike underscores the urgency of this matter; it's a plea for fairness, dignity, and respect. As Barnet residents, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the struggles faced by those who tirelessly serve our community.

Barnet resident

AS A care worker and resident of Barnet, I felt I was letting down the seven people I was responsible for looking after and feeding. I told the team leaders "I don't want to be alone in the unit any more with seven people and only me on a 12 hour shift." Four had poor mobility. Three were mobile but two showed mental health needs - shouting and running around, especially at mealtimes. If only there were enough mental health social workers to advise me. I went to work in fear and ended my shift in tears. Then my back cracked and I could not walk or work.

Barnet resident



Open letter to Barnet Council's Director of Adult Social Services

YOU WILL be aware of the professional standards set out by our regulatory body, Social Work England, and the expectation that social workers should raise concerns about unsafe practice and should challenge practices, systems, and processes where necessary. We implore you to act on your responsibilities within the social work profession and also those set out within the framework of the law.

The Care Act 2014 is underpinned by the responsibility for local authorities to promote wellbeing and to prevent, delay, and reduce a person's needs for care and support. We have been reporting that we, on the front line, do not feel that we are meeting this statutory responsibility and are concerned about the safety and wellbeing of the residents of Barnet, the impact on ourselves as regulated professionals, and the impact on Barnet Council. This open letter stresses a number of the key areas:

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman considers it reasonable for a person to wait four to six weeks for an assessment. In August 2022 we were raising concerns about staffing levels and that our waiting list for an assessment under the Care Act was up to six months. Since then, the situation has continued to become far more critical, with 14 staff members leaving within a year and the waitlist more than doubling. The staff who left were often the staff members with the most experience, many working their entire 20-30 year careers as social workers within Barnet Mental Health. This means that our teams have been left without an experienced workforce. In one team, figures demonstrate that the team has lost 75% of the experience in the past year alone. The impact is that our waiting lists have now drastically increased, reaching up to 15 months, and continue to grow. Without adequate intervention, we predict that the waiting list will reach two years in 2024.

It should be stressed that these are not people with low level needs for whom it is safe to wait for an assessment. People with high and complex needs are frequently waiting up to 15 months. Without adequate support, people with serious mental disorders are at significantly increased risk of deterioration to their mental state. Far too often our work becomes crisis management. The Care Act emphasises the need to focus on preventing and delaying needs for care and support, which we are not doing.

When people are left to deteriorate, unmanaged risks to their health and wellbeing put them at significant risk of harm, and even death, whilst awaiting an assessment. This is particularly concerning given that the people we work with have serious mental disorders, which already elevates risk. We further see this in complex presentations of self-neglect owing to a deterioration in mental state. People on our waiting list are deteriorating to such a degree that the risks to their health and wellbeing fall under the scope of safeguarding.

The London Multi-agency Adult Safeguarding Policy and Procedures sets out the target



timescale for safeguarding enquiry actions as within 20 days. However, in Barnet Mental Health Social Care we do not always have capacity to even allocate the case to a worker within this timeframe, let alone undertake enquiry actions. The result is that safeguarding enquiries have, at times, been held by duty workers, which is unsafe, or worse yet, left on the waiting list awaiting capacity to be allocated.

Leaving people to deteriorate for up to 15 months is not in line with the responsibility to promote wellbeing nor to prevent needs. It also increases the input needed from workers and much time is spent working diligently to engage people who are unwell and to work collaboratively to reduce serious risks to the person's health and wellbeing. The progress of work is much slower and creates further delay in workers picking up new cases. This adds yet further pressure to the waiting list.

The Care Act specifically states that reviews should be undertaken at least every 12 months. In Barnet people are not receiving regular reviews in line with this statutory requirement. Only those who contact social services to request a review are being added to the active waiting list, though they too join the wait of up to 15 months.

Many of the vulnerable people we work with do not have informal carers and their needs are simply going unmet. However, for those who do have informal carers, we have seen that the significant waiting lists are placing high levels of stress on the carers, which is resulting in carer breakdown. This too, we feel is not in line with the Care Act.

The Care Act sets out pathways for young people approaching transition to Adult Social Care. However, despite Family Service bringing young people to our attention six months prior to their 18th birthday, we do not have the

capacity to allocate these young people a social worker and they are not receiving assessments before they turn 18, which is not in line with the Care Act.

We are told that there is no money within Barnet Council. But current practice costs Barnet Council significantly more. As people are left to deteriorate for up to 15 months, their needs increase. The subsequent increased packages of care and placements in care homes costs Barnet Council more money than timely care and support.

The fact that we cannot undertake timely reviews means that people placed in supported accommodation or care homes as a temporary measure do not receive input to step them down and promote their independence. This too means Barnet Council is paying more, often for many years.

People with severe mental ill-health do not receive the support they need to remain well

KEY POINTS ABOUT THE DISPUTE

- 1 Mental health social workers support adults who experience mental ill-health to live safely and with dignity.
- 2 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman says four to six weeks is a reasonable wait time for a needs assessment under the Care Act 2014. In Barnet Mental Health Services the wait time has now reached 17 months.
- 3 Twenty-one staff have left the Mental Health Social Work Teams in the last 20 months, and another has handed in their notice. Despite this, the council refuses to apply the same recruitment and retention payment to mental health social workers that it applies to Family Service social workers who are in teams with better staff retention rates.
- 4 Mental health social workers in Barnet are calling for the council to provide a safe service, no waiting lists and fair pay.
- 5 Mental health social workers have taken 27 days of strike action (we estimate this works out to 405 LOST working days or 4,050 service user contacts LOST for mental health service users) since September 2023, but the Chief Executive of Barnet Council still refuses to hold meaningful talks to try and end this dispute.

February 2024

and live in the community. This increases the risk of avoidable, or delayable, deterioration to mental health, which can result in the person's compulsory admission to mental health hospital. This too has financial implications for Barnet Council due to the increased need for Mental Health Act assessments undertaken by Approved Mental Health Professionals. Furthermore, if a person is compulsorily admitted under relevant sections of the Mental Health Act, Barnet Council has financial responsibilities to meet the person's needs under section 117. Again, as these are not being regularly reviewed, Barnet Council is overspending on care.

We have been told that there are similar issues across adult social care. In the absence of any statistics provided by Barnet Council we have no other option than to resort to anecdotal evidence. Colleagues in other London Boroughs inform us that their waiting lists are nowhere near 15 months, with one worker, who left Barnet this year, informing us that the waiting list at the London council she now works for is only up to six weeks.

The remaining staff are desperately trying to plug the gaps and the result is a significant impact on their wellbeing, with staff reporting poorer physical and mental health. When surveyed, everyone who responded stated they had considered leaving the service. We remain deeply concerned for the vulnerable residents of Barnet whom we serve, and we continue to challenge the lack of a safe service and the increasing waiting lists which put Barnet residents at risk of harm, and even death.

We feel that Barnet is not meeting its statutory responsibilities and ask for the means to provide a stable, experienced, and permanent workforce. To do this, we ask for a reasonable recruitment and retention payment, already in place for Family Service, to promote staff to remain in Barnet rather than leave for better paid and less stressful positions. We ask that you engage in negotiations so that we may all come together to meet our statutory responsibilities and the needs of Barnet residents.

Yours sincerely,
Barnet Mental Health Social Workers
November 2023

This letter has been edited for length

Barnet has the money to end this dispute!

BARNET UNISON is demanding the payment of a 20% recruitment and retention payment for mental health social workers.

In negotiations the council revealed it had double the money available to settle this dispute in full. This is not a question of money. The council is choosing not to settle the dispute.

On what principle is the council making a stand?

We do know that the council has threatened to use the Tory anti-trade union legislation against the workers and their trade union at various times. Meanwhile it took over six months and 27 strike days for the council to go to ACAS talks with the trade union.

It is scandalous that Barnet Council is prepared to play fast and loose with a service which is all about safeguarding vulnerable people in the community, rather than settle this dispute. It is prepared to have the worst performing mental health service in the UK rather than settle this dispute.

If you are reading this and want to support the social workers please follow the actions listed on page 4 of this newsletter. Do not let Barnet Council starve the workers back to work. Please stand with them and fight for a better mental health service with:

- A safe service!
- No waiting lists!
- Fair pay!

@barnet_unison
Barnet Unison Branch
barnetunison

www.barnetunison.me.uk

Message from Christina McAnea, UNISON General Secretary

Sending solidarity greetings on behalf of everyone in UNISON to the mental health social workers on strike at Barnet Council. Your roles are so important to the local community. And I'm sure the people relying on your support, know you deserve to have decent pay, terms and conditions. But because the council fails to recognise that, the service is facing recruitment and retention problems that are only harming the local community. I know you have the support of your region and I hope your action will force the council to negotiate with UNISON to resolve the dispute. Best of luck and stay strong and united. Thank you.



Photo: UNISON

Campaign for Real Care

THE LACK of engagement with issues within adult social care services is a widespread problem that demands attention. Barnet mental health social workers recognise their struggle is shared. Adults with mental health needs are increasingly at risk, a situation exacerbated by a service lacking in prevention measures, solely addressing crises within existing budgets and with growing waiting lists. This system undervalues both its workers and those it serves, perpetuating a cycle of crisis. People fall deeper into mental health despair. Social workers leave in droves.

Evan lives in Barnet and is a 40 year old adult with a range of mental health disorders. He has become socially isolated and is unemployed due to the long term effects of mental and physical abuse and trauma, depression, anxiety and drug addiction. Our campaign group helped Evan to approach Barnet Social Services for an assessment. He was told he would be put on a waiting list for a Care Act assessment and in the meantime must attend sessions with The Network, a signposting service.

It turns out his assessment was dependent on him attending these sessions, but he was never told this. Over the next two years Evan's mental and physical health got worse, with numerous visits to ER in repeated crisis and increased social isolation. Without support Evan couldn't attend any Network recommended group. He was eventually discharged from the Network and refused a Care Act assessment on this basis. So, after waiting all that time he is back at square one, more traumatised, alone and without formal advocacy.

But the 2014 Care Act says wellbeing is a fundamental right, entrusting local authorities with the legal duty and statutory power to assess and prioritise diverse needs. These needs fall under nine areas, including dignity, mental and physical health and emotional and social wellbeing, protection from abuse and neglect, choice and control over your day to day life, suitability of housing and participation in society. The reality falls far short. Social workers are constrained by budget managers, and limited to allocating resources based on narrow "eligibility" criteria. And that's if they are even able to undertake needs assessments in the first place. Unmet needs go unrecorded, distorting budget allocations and exacerbating crises. The cycle continues.

Evan's story is just one of many. It demonstrates how bad things are and how difficult it is for people like Evan to climb out of mental health crisis. Care Act assessments, which are a right under the law, are withheld and have to be earned because social work waiting lists are so unmanageable. The idea of having access to preventative resources and meaningful support is a fantasy for many.

Barnet Council stands as a stark example of this systemic failure, refusing to negotiate with striking social workers or acknowledge unlawful practices. Despite claiming to meet statutory duties and balanced budgets, the disconnect between rhetoric and reality persists, punishing vulnerable citizens like Evan and dedicated workers trying to manage ever increasing crises.

Barnet's Labour councillors, once champions of change, now seem resigned to political inertia, failing to challenge senior officers and address the root issues. However, grassroots activism persists, demanding accountability and reform. It's time for transparency, for the truth about resource-led social care practices to be acknowledged, and for policy and practice to align with legal obligations and human rights. The citizens and workforce of Barnet deserve nothing less.

● Visit campaignrealcare.org for more information and to support our Charter for the Right To Wellbeing

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

What's going on in Barnet?

ACCORDING TO an article in a national newspaper in January 2024 Barnet, Enfield and Haringey have the highest number of seven-day readmissions into hospital. The article reported:

“Marjorie Wallace, the chief executive of the mental health charity Sane, said she was shocked by the figures. Too many readmissions occurred because vulnerable patients received inadequate help from community-based mental health teams after their discharge, she said. That lack of support can be so significant that ‘in some tragic cases’ patients kill themselves.

“The highest risk of suicide can be within the first 48 hours following discharge, yet we still know patients who are left to go home alone to a flat or unsupported accommodation with nowhere to turn for help.”

The Guardian, 12 January 2024

We know this is happening in Barnet and we know that patients are being discharged without having a formal assessment from a mental health social worker due to the long and growing waiting lists. Social workers are trained and skilled in assessing, identifying and managing safeguarding under Section

42 of the Care Act. We are able to identify the organisational abuse which is taking place in our own workplace. It's time for Barnet Council to take responsibility for its legal duties and negotiate with the mental health social workers to provide a safe and effective service in order to protect their residents from significant harm.

Discharges from in-patient mental health wards are being delayed due to urgent high risk community work. This contributes to mental health hospital bed shortages and impacts on the wellbeing and safety of people in mental health crisis. There is a risk of being discharged inappropriately due to NHS bed demand, which in turn contributes to the fact that Barnet has one of the highest readmission rates for mental health in the country. The impact of staffing turnover across the Mental Health Social Work Teams means that the NHS is having to pay for private beds, which can cost up to £5,000 per week for one person.

Twenty staff, including most of the experienced staff members with 20-30 years of mental health experience in Barnet, have left in the last 18 months. Furthermore,



Photo: Barnet UNISON

another staff member recently handed in their notice. One third of the remaining staff have worked for Barnet for less than 12 months.

A reliance on students and newly qualified social workers means inexperienced staff are doing the work that until recently would have been carried out by highly experienced professionals with at least five years of mental health social work experience. This creates additional risk for the adults that social workers support and contributes to high levels of staff burnout. In a UNISON staff survey 100% of staff said they were thinking about leaving.

Mental health social workers are experiencing a lack of access to appropriate training, leading staff members feeling disempowered and unable to support service users effectively. For example, when the criteria are met, mental health social workers have a duty to carry out an assessment of needs under Section 117 Mental Health Act 1983 yet 84% of the current workforce have not received any essential training in the legal duties under the act. Furthermore, demands on staff due to continuous turnover mean that the ability to attend mandatory training is being critically compromised.

Mental health social worker pay in Barnet is generally less than it is for equivalent roles in the NHS or higher education settings, so local

authority cannot compete for experienced workers. However, Barnet will only benchmark against other north London local authorities, which does not reflect the real costs in the job market as a whole. Interestingly, the council does not apply this logic to its social workers in Family Service, who are benchmarked against agency staff rates. Barnet Council needs to treat mental health social workers the same as Family Service social workers and benchmark against the whole of the market which includes agency, NHS and university rates of pay.

In August 2023 100% of Barnet's mental health social workers voted to take strike action. The council preferred to have 27 days of strike action (405 days lost to mental health services) rather than sit down to negotiate a solution with the workers. It has now become clear that the council does have the money available to settle the dispute in full. It is choosing not to do so.

Earlier in the year Barnet Council announced that it was outsourcing social work to an expensive agency to carry out work that should have been completed by in-house staff. The council claims it is in a financial crisis yet it prefers to use its money to pay agencies rather than resolving this dispute, retaining its staff and allowing in-house social workers to carry out these assessments.

Barnet Voice

BARNET UNISON NEWSLETTER APRIL 2024



Photo: Barnet UNISON

What is mental health social work?

MENTAL HEALTH social workers support adults with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, psychosis and other serious and enduring mental health conditions. They also support autistic adults and adults with ADHD, older adults with dementia who have been detained on mental health wards and adults with substance abuse issues.

The Care Act 2014 gives local authorities statutory responsibility for safeguarding adults and assessing the eligible care and support needs of adults with physical and mental health conditions. Councils also have joint responsibility with local health boards for providing after-care support to prevent readmission for adults detained under section 3 of the Mental Health Act 1983.

Social workers can also undertake additional training to become Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs). It is AMHPs who carry out assessments under the Mental Health Act 1983 to determine if a person poses a risk to themselves or others to the point that they require the safeguard of an admission to a mental health ward and either assessment or treatment.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Visit our picket lines at Barnet Council Head Office

2 Bristol Avenue, London NW9 4EW

From 8-10 am on the following days:

15 April – 26 April 2024
13 May – 1 June 2024
17 June – 12 July 2024

Nearest tube: Colindale station (Northern Line)

Email our strikers a solidarity message

contactus@barnetunison.org.uk

Make a donation to the Industrial Action Fund

Email the office at contactus@barnetunison.org.uk for details

Sign Barnet UNISON's email campaign to Barnet Council Chief Executive

<https://bit.ly/barnetunison2024>

or use the QR code. Please let us know when he replies!



Email or write a letter to

John Hooton, Chief Executive of Barnet Council

Email: john.hooton@barnet.gov.uk

Write to: London Borough of Barnet

2 Bristol Avenue, London NW9 4EW

Clr Barry Rawlings, Leader of Barnet Council

Email: clr.b.rawlings@barnet.gov.uk

Write to: London Borough of Barnet

2 Bristol Avenue, London NW9 4EW

BARNET UNISON is supporting UNISON members in Mental Health Social Work Teams who have taken 27 days of strike action which equates to approximately 405 lost working days for mental health service users in Barnet.

These workers are now taking a further nine weeks of strike action over 13 weeks which equates to many more lost working days and contacts for mental health service users. They are asking for pay equality with social workers in Barnet Family Service.

Social workers in Mental Health Social Work Teams and Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs) are working hard to provide residents of Barnet with support through assessing eligible care needs, carrying out safeguarding enquiries and

carrying out Mental Health Act assessments. All too often residents in Barnet wait far too long to receive support, with some people waiting more than 17 months to be allocated a social worker for a needs assessment. Over the last 18 months the service has been reliant on newly qualified social workers and students while most of the experienced staff have gradually left for better paid roles, better working conditions in other local authorities or health services.

The stress and lack of resources is a significant contributor to the high turnover of staff in mental health social work, with workers saying they are “exhausted” and “very stressed”.

In Barnet Family Service recruitment and retention challenges are in part tackled

through the application of a recruitment and retention policy in which social workers receive between 15% and 25% recruitment and retention payments.

Barnet UNISON mental health social workers are simply asking for the same recruitment and retention policy to be applied to social workers in the adult mental health teams. The care mental health social workers provide and the skills they hold are equal to those of our social work colleagues in Family Service and in other adult social work teams.

In the last 20 months at least 21 out of a workforce of around 28 permanent and locum staff have left Barnet across the two social work teams and AMHP Team.

Each team member whether permanent or locum will have carried a caseload and by

leaving this creates issues for service users and directly impacts on team members who will have to take up cover whilst another recruitment takes place.

For months Barnet management denied there was even a retention problem.

- **Whilst the council is recruiting, it is not recruiting experienced mental health social workers.**
- **The council is losing experienced mental health social workers.**
- **The council is losing newly qualified mental health social workers.**
- **The council is training AMHPs and losing them to other employers.**

Please send solidarity messages to contactus@barnetunison.org.uk and donate to our strike fund

JOIN UNISON TODAY

You can sign up to Unison online at join.unison.org.uk

Alternatively ring our free number

0800 0857 857

Weekdays 6am – 12am

Saturdays 9am – 4pm

Or speak to a rep at the Barnet branch office

020 8359 2088

CONTACT US!

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