Keeping it Together

How community-based organisations are supporting London's mental health

Arielle
Mental Fight Club

Executive summary

Mental ill health is rapidly increasing in London. But those suffering from mental health problems and illnesses rarely get adequate support throughout their mental health journey. Health services are often very clinical, with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and limited contact between patient and practitioner. This can limit the prospect of improving people's mental health.

Not only does this have a negative impact on Londoners but also on our wider community. Connections between mental ill health and educational attainment, unemployment and the criminal justice system are well-established.

Increasingly, community-based organisations fill the gaps left by strained public services. They attempt to close the gaps in the current system and can do this well. They can often respond more quickly and flexibly to the complex landscape of mental health needs. They know their communities and are aware of local needs.

We spoke to eight community-based organisations as well as network and national organisations to understand how they are tailoring their services and using their assets to improve mental health. This report uses their views to show how, at their best, community based organisations are making a significant difference to the mental health of Londoners.

Our main findings are:

- Community-based organisations can excel in providing non-clinical support. They focus on a positive physical space and staff dedicated to building personal and trusting relationships.
- The individual is at the centre of an organisation's activities. Unlike many statutory services, they can offer flexible, targeted and quick support to Londoners in need.
- They work to prevent mental ill health by increasing awareness and reducing stigma in their communities. This is likely to have a long-term impact on a variety of different challenges facing communities across London.

By building networks of support and stability to people across London which adapt to individual needs and strengths, these organisations are empowering Londoners to lead happier and healthier lives.

Introduction

A report by Sophie Blank

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A quarter of Londoners experience a mental health condition.

"While in recent years we have seen a positive change in attitudes and greater public understanding of the issues surrounding mental health, many Londoners are not seeking the support and treatment they need early enough – if at all. In 21st century London, this is simply unacceptable. Now, more than ever we need to work with communities and help build resilience so that all Londoners have the opportunity to thrive."

- Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London

Awareness and diagnosis of mental health conditions are on the rise. In any given year, an estimated one in four Londoners will experience a diagnosable mental health condition.[i] A third of these will experience two or more conditions at once.[ii]

Mental health services are unable to meet demand, leaving many Londoners unattended and at risk of deteriorating mental health.[iii] As the Mayor of London says, communities are an increasingly vital source of support across all ages, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

Community based organisations (CBOs) often have a positive long-term impact on communities across London. These organisations share the following characteristics:

- Small in size, with many of them operating on a shoestring budget.
- Funded primarily through charitable grants, and heavily utilising volunteers from the local community.
- Based within the communities they serve and have usually develop out of a community response to deprivation and hardship.
- Well connected to people and organisations in their community, giving them deep insight into local needs and can effectively target and address them.

Every CBO is unique in the approach it promotes and the community it supports. They often address prejudice and discrimination, reduce stigma and reach individuals that otherwise might fall through the gaps of ever-retreating services.

But what makes these organisations so important to Londoners? How are they able to support people suffering from deteriorating mental health? Is their approach to mental health and wellbeing different to clinical settings? And if so, in what ways?

About this report

This report attempts to tell the story of how CBOs across London are supporting individuals suffering from mental health problems. It gives a platform to their views and experiences of the reality of working at the community level and makes the case for their continued support.

In 2017, The London Community Foundation funded nearly 950 projects from charities and CBOs across the city. We have unparalleled access to groups tackling a variety of social issues. We used this access to speak to a variety of organisations supporting individuals suffering from mental health problems.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of CBOs to the mental health of Londoners. Most fundamentally, they support people who are not well serviced by more clinical mental health services, which are characterised by clinical diagnoses followed by medication or standardised therapies.

CBOs focus on listening, building personable relationships and placing an emphasis on the individual's mental wellbeing.

They can offer immediate and flexible support. In the long-term, they can help people establish robust and sustainable support networks, increasing people's mental wellbeing whilst changing the way communities approach mental health and ill health.

This report is designed to demonstrate this, discussing three key findings about CBOs:

1. They offer support in a non-clinical environment. They focus on a positive physical space and staff dedicated to building personal relationships of trust.
2. The individual is at the centre of their activities. This means that, unlike many statutory services, they offer flexible, targeted and immediate support to Londoners in need.
3. They prevent mental ill health by increasing awareness and reducing stigma in their communities.

These findings have emerged through semi-structured interviews with staff and beneficiaries from CBOs across London, as well as national and network organisations.

Organisations we spoke to as part of this report

Sutton Community Farm

Sutton Community Farm was founded in 2010 in response to a community consultation that showed a desire for fresh, locally grown food to be available in the area, as well as a need for employment and skills training. So far, the farm has welcomed more than 3,000 volunteers, who support staff in growing and harvesting vegetables and packing the farm's VegBoxes. In 2017, the farm grew 15.5 tonnes of produce, which equals approximately 540 meals a day.

The Mosaic Clubhouse

Founded in 1994, Mosaic Clubhouse helps people affected by mental illness to have a better quality of life by increasing their engagement and participation in the wider community. The charity is based in Brixton and follows the internationally recognised Clubhouse model of rehabilitation, whereby staff and attendees (referred to as "members") work together to run the Clubhouse. By offering a non-judgemental, safe working environment Mosaic becomes a welcoming place for individuals to develop their skills and interests - somewhere where they are needed and valued, where being part of a community provides a sense of belonging and meaning.

Streets of Growth

Streets of Growth was founded in 2001 by Tower Hamlets resident Darren Way. Starting off in Bromley-by-Bow, the small organisation soon expanded and is now active borough-wide in Tower Hamlets with the mission to transform the lifestyles of young people who are struggling to develop. Streets of Growth engages both hard-to-reach individuals as well as young people that are not considered sufficiently at risk and therefore fall through the gaps of social services. Since its foundation, the group has supported a total of 3,300 young people.

Mosaic Community Trust

Mosaic Community Trust was founded in 2005 and tackles issues of religious intolerance, community cohesion, health and mental wellbeing. Over the past 10 years, the organisation's activities have focused on uniting, empowering and integrating Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities to transform the lives of disadvantaged individuals. The group specifically targets BME women and empowers them as active and engaged citizens to change local attitudes to mental health and wellbeing.

The Maya Centre

The Maya Centre is a specialist charity that offers free psychodynamic counselling to women who have mental health issues after having experienced or are at risk of gender-based violence or abuse. The group works with women who find it difficult to engage with mental health services. Through the psychodynamic process, trained counsellors work with clients to look at problems in the present and in the past. Additionally, the Maya Centre offers a number of other services to support other needs that the women might have on their journey to recovery, such as yoga and meditation, psycho-education workshops or unstructured peer support.

The Mental Fight Club

Mental Fight Club's mission is 'to provide safe, creative spaces – real and virtual – which inspire people through mental struggles of all kinds into a greater sense of their own potential, sparked by connectedness with others.' At The Dragon Café, the organisation's weekly flagship project, more than 180 people enjoy and engage in creative and wellbeing activities to aid their mental health. Activities are led by those who have been affected by mental ill health and the local community.

Mental Health Foundation

The Mental Health Foundation is a nationwide mental health charity with the vision of a world with good mental health for all, which they aim to achieve by helping people to thrive through understanding, protecting and sustaining their mental health.

SANE

SANE was established in 1986 to improve the quality of life for people affected by mental illness. Today, the charity is active UK-wide with a vision of raising public awareness, exciting research and bringing more effective professional treatment and compassionate care to everyone affected by mental illness.

Thrive LDN

Thrive LDN is a citywide movement to improve the mental health and wellbeing of all Londoners. Supported by the Mayor of London and led by the London Health Board, the movement aspires to empower individuals and communities to lead change, address inequalities that lead to poor mental health and make London a city where people can create, influence and shape ways to improve mental health and wellbeing.

A note on terminology…

Terminology in mental health research and practice is contentious and inconsistent. We support the idea that mental health ranges on a scale from very good to very bad, as it stresses the fluidity of mental health, which may easily and quickly shift from good to bad.

We specifically use the term 'illness' when speaking about common mental disorders such as depression or anxiety, but also less common mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Referring to these conditions as illnesses stresses their severity. It also underlines that mental illnesses should be taken as seriously as physical illnesses.

Mental health in London

The UK's mental health is a growing concern. 25 per cent of individuals in the UK will experience at least one diagnosable mental health condition in any given year.[iv] Nearly half of the adult population (43.4 per cent) think that they have had a diagnosable mental health condition at some point in their life (35.2 per cent of men and 51.2 per cent of women).[v] Only 13 per cent of adults in the UK report living with high levels of good mental health.[vi]

Mental ill health is increasingly recognised as an illness: people with severe and prolonged mental illness are at risk of dying on average 15 to 20 years earlier than their counterparts.[vii] Yet, little is done to align services to the extent of mental ill health across the capital, with only one in four Londoners with mental health problems receiving treatment.[viii] One in ten people have been waiting for over a year to receive treatment.[ix] More than half of people are not offered a choice in the type of therapies they receive and three in four Londoners are not given a choice as to where they receive treatment.[x]

The economic costs of mental health are shocking. In London alone, the wider impacts of mental ill health result in approximately £26 billion in total economic and social costs to London, each year.[xi] This equates to £2,990 to £3,219 per person.[xii]

Mental ill health affects Londoners of all backgrounds and ages

In every classroom, an average of three children have a diagnosable mental health problem.[xiii] This translates to one in ten children. The growing number of children diagnosed with mental health problems has not been met with a growth in support services. Between 2013/14 and 2014/15, referral rates for the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) grew five times faster than the service itself.[xiv] While this development is distressing on its own, research reveals that CAMHS budgets have been cut significantly in recent years.[xv]

For adults and older people, the findings are similar. One in six people over the age of 16 have a common mental disorder.[xvi] Rates for mental illness have increased in men and women aged 55 to 64.[xvii] Mental ill health now amounts to nearly half of all ill health among people under 65.[xviii] Around 17 per cent of men and women aged 65 and over are affected by depression and anxiety.[xix] 40 per cent of older people living in care homes are affected by depression.[xx] At the same time, it is estimated that 85 per cent of older people with depression do not receive treatment by the NHS.[xxi]

The vast implications of mental ill health for educational attainment,[xxii] unemployment and worklessness[xxiii] or the criminal justice system are well-established. 90 per cent of prisoners suffer from mental ill health.[xxiv] The majority of prisoners does not come to prison with mental ill health, but develop it once inside.[xxv] Once they leave, their mental health continues to deteriorate.

Some parts of society are affected disproportionately

Mental ill health can affect anyone, but some groups in society suffer disproportionately. The links between mental illness and socio-economic context are well established.[xxvi] For example, children from low income families are three times more likely to suffer from mental ill health compared to children from higher income families.[xxvii]

Ethnicity also impacts negatively. People with black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds are at a substantially higher risk of deteriorating mental health.[xxviii] Their treatment rates are also considerably lower compared to their white counterparts as well.[xxix] This is partially connected to socio-economic adversity and low income, which is higher among BME groups. The picture is similar in relation to sexual orientation and disability.

How communities are responding

We have discovered that CBOs are rebuilding social networks and helping people to build the relationships they need to support their mental health. These organisations focus on a person's strengths and skills to increase their resilience, in the hope that it leads to long term mental health improvements.

These organisations play a substantial role in improving the mental health of Londoners – a role that is rarely discussed. In this section we attempt to rectify this, using the views of those working and benefiting from community based activity. We have three main findings:

1. The non-clinical environment of CBOs creates a positive, engaging experience for service users.
2. They tailor their services to the needs of the individual.
3. They push for a wider change in attitudes towards mental health in their communities.

1. The non-clinical environment of community based organisations creates a positive, engaging experience for service users

Throughout our conversations, the positive environment that CBOs create was repeatedly mentioned by beneficiaries as one of the biggest differences when compared to statutory services. It is something that can be experienced first-hand when visiting these groups. The physical space is inviting and light, and staff focus on building relationships of trust with beneficiaries. This encourages service users to open up, talk about problems and develop relationships with staff and among themselves.

An inviting physical space

From being outdoors at Sutton Community Farm, calm peer-support groups at Mosaic Community Trust to busy upcycling workshops at Streets of Growth or the hustle and bustle at Mental Fight Club's Dragon Café – one thing the organisations had in common was the inviting and engaging atmosphere that could be experienced upon arrival.

The locations we visited were filled with light and music was playing. People were chatting or taking part in engaging activities, such as horticulture, drawing, singing, group discussions or informative sessions regarding employment and housing. The activities were meaningful and encouraged socialising, skills development and exercise.

> "Sometimes hospitals insult people – they neglect their intellect."
> - Volunteer, Mental Fight Club

This open environment, coupled with interesting and engaging activities, creates a feeling of homeliness - an inviting space where individuals are encouraged to be themselves and pursue their interests.

> "Singing raises my mood in a way that has a lasting effect that others comment on and that no drug could ever reproduce– even when I have been at my very lowest ebb. It is the sense of belonging, the sense of inclusivity, the safety in numbers and knowing that I can choose how I want to interact because the flexibility and support is already present."
> - Attendee at the Mental Fight Club's Dragon Cafe

They resemble more of a social space than a mental health service. Every individual is accepted, irrespective of their background or level of mental illness. The networks that people develop provide a sense of belonging and they often form a community.

This can be in stark contrast to clinical mental health settings, which were described by many as impersonal and off-putting. CBOs often reach these people, for whom clinical settings are not appropriate.

We spoke to Sonia, Emily and Peter, members of the Mosaic Clubhouse.[xxx] Sonia was very critical of public mental health services. Having suffered from mental ill health for years, she repeatedly felt "pushed around." Statutory services made her feel like being on a conveyor belt.

Emily had to wait six months for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) on the NHS, which ultimately led her family to seek private support because her mental health deteriorated continuously. Peter had both positive and negative experiences. Prior to his current counsellor, whom he really likes, he had a string of practitioners who had dismissed his problems and were discouraging.

All three feel safe and accepted at the Clubhouse. The environment is relaxed, support is easily accessible, and they help to run the organisation, side-by-side with staff. They are able to explore personal and professional interests thanks to the activities offered – something that is impossible in clinical mental health settings. This gives them something positive to focus on and look forward to their future.

The organisations we spoke to go beyond mental health support. With an open and bright environment and a variety of activities on offer, they offer users a sense of control over their experience. Individuals can decide which activities to partake in and when to do so, which helps build confidence and independence.

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"I am gutsy now."
- Emily, a member of Mosaic Clubhouse

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The inviting and open physical environment these community groups create not only has a great impact on mental health in the short-term; it has a positive effect on people's long-term ability to cope.

Developing personal and trusting relationships

The staff play a huge role in improving the mental wellbeing of those accessing the services of CBOs. The trusting relationships that are formed between staff and service users is a key asset.

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"We try to check in with people as often as we can to make sure they are alright."
- Charlotte, Sutton Community Farm

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Focusing less on the type of therapy itself but more on the quality of support seems to have a big impact. It was felt that in a clinical setting, patients rarely know their counsellors and CBT is often limited to six or 12 sessions.

With CBOs, this can be different. Staff take the time to talk to every beneficiary and support is flexible and adapted to individual needs. Often, friendships between staff and service users develop. People feel like they are part of a family. For instance, Emily, from Mosaic Clubhouse, describes Nikki, her youth worker at the Clubhouse, as her big sister. These support networks prove to be vital.

"What I noticed, what I realised was that this was not a critical environment, that it was flexible enough to support people's individual needs and the buzz, the feeling was infectious. So I started to sit on the edge until I was confident enough to join the circle."
- An attendee at Mental Fight Club's Dragon Café

The absence of a rigid set of rules or behaviour also helps. Participants can take as long as they need to join activities or open up. Nobody is rushed or judged.

The close relationship between beneficiaries and staff can have a downside. Disclosure to staff is extensive, yet most staff of the CBOs we visited are not specifically trained in counselling. They find it difficult to 'switch off' at the end of a working day, especially when professional boundaries are blurred and friendships develop. It can lead to long-term burn out.

Organisations do put in place support for staff to deal with this. At the Mental Fight Club, members of staff meet on a weekly basis to have 'pass it on' workshops where they share experiences and discuss what happened during the week. Better training opportunities and skills development for staff help, but on limited resources these groups can only do so much.

2. **They tailor their services to the needs of the individual**

In 2013, 58 per cent of people suffering from deteriorated mental health were not offered a choice in the type of therapies they received.[xxxi] Considering the variety and complexity of individual needs, it is understandable that clinical services are not effective for everyone.

The organisations we spoke to put the service user at the centre of their activities. This can be an empowering experience.

"I know what helps me - I have enough insight for that and singing at the Dragon Café has become not only my safe outlet but a place where I enjoy myself, where I have fun, where I laugh, where I meet other people. It has built my confidence; it has given me some life back. You cannot underestimate what that means."

- A regular attendee at The Dragon Cafe

Concentrating on people's strengths as a platform for change

Rather than focussing only on mental ill health, the CBOs we visited identify and build on each person's capabilities and strengths. They can improve people's confidence, self-esteem and build resilience.

The move away from focussing on problems, provides a platform for change and gives people more control over their mental health journey. This often leads to a focus on improving support networks and resilience and encourages participants to open up, address their mental health problems and build skills for the future.

Accepting people for who they are, including their weaknesses

"The lack of labelling is really important."
- Charlotte, Sutton Community Farm

The organisations we spoke to do not attempt to label people and assign their mental ill health to clear categories. They accept individuals for who they are, independent of what mental health problems they might suffer from.

"Mental health is too complex to assign to clear categories. 'Box-ticking' restricts the support offered. It invites counsellors to focus only on certain aspects of a mental health problem."
- Tahera, Director at the Maya Centre

Streets of Growth is a charity that works with high-at-risk young adults with the aim of changing their lifestyle and finding a place in society. Although the organisation is not a mental health charity per se, when speaking to Diane, Koyes and Majeda, we quickly discovered that mental health support is a vital part of their work and indispensable for the young people they work with.

The organisation's expertise lies in listening. They allow young people to speak openly without having to fear potential repercussions of disclosure. Their staff remain neutral and do not judge or condemn, which is vital in the charged environment of youth violence.

"Relapse is normal and part of any transitioning process. We never give up on young people, continually reaching out until they can engage for themselves."

– Diane, Streets of Growth

When seeking support from public services, the staff we spoke to felt that young people rarely encounter acceptance and openness, especially high-risk individuals. As a result, it is felt that many young people in need of support avoid going to therapies delivered by statutory services. It is these people that CBOs tend to work with.

Giving people a sense of control

Sutton Community Farm is another example of the positive impact of CBOs on the mental wellbeing of Londoners. Volunteers are encouraged to start their own projects or grow vegetables. This often builds confidence, encourages creativity and empowers individuals. Having their own project gives them purpose and something positive to focus on.

"Time spent volunteering at Sutton Community Farm has really helped towards lifting my low mood [...].

I try to volunteer regularly every Wednesday as I find it's good for me to have a set routine and as I've begun to build friendships and new skills there, it's massively helped improve my self-esteem too. Having tried various things over the years to improve my depression including CBT, one-to-one therapy, antidepressants and nutritional therapy - all of which have helped to some extent - being at the farm seems the most natural way of improving my mental health whilst socialising, being active and learning new skills for the future."

- A volunteer at Sutton Community Farm describes his experience

3. Creating wider change in attitudes towards mental health

The CBOs we spoke to make a significant contribution to the wider communities in which they operate by increasing awareness of mental health and reducing stigma.

The Mosaic Community Trust places emphasis on the "intergenerational impact" of their work. Based at Church Street, NW8, the Trust trains women from BME backgrounds in giving Indian head massages. Whilst doing so they discuss issues around mental health and wellbeing and work to improve women's life skills, such as confidence, resilience and listening. After taking part in the course, the women go into the wider community and inform husbands, elders, children and friends about the importance of good mental health. They also offer head massages to other women to reduce stress and improve overall wellbeing.

This empowers the women to improve their own wellbeing. It also bridges divides between different ethnic groups by connecting women and building networks of friendship and support. It has had a long-term positive impact on the Church Street community, as Lena and Heike told us.

"I really enjoyed attending the course and have learnt so much. We talked about stress, anxiety, parenting, internet safety, depression, domestic abuse, etc. I found all the topics we discussed really relevant; especially when we learnt about mental health and depression.

I am looking forward to putting theory into practice now, applying my knowledge of Indian Head massage and mental health. All the knowledge I have gained from this course will help me in my community outreach work, I will be able to identify mental health issues within my community and with my clients during consultations. I will be able to advise people on where they can go for help and that they should look after their mental health. I will work to challenge the stigma around mental health in my community."

- Amouna, a participant in Mosaic Community Trust's 'Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Champions' Course

Other CBOs have a similar impact:

> "No one should feel ashamed by sharing his experiences, together we can end stigma. Yes, that [is] what I have learnt from joining the group of mental health and Indian head massage."
> - Another participant in the 'Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Champions' Course

The Mental Fight Club also raises awareness and reduces stigma. They contribute to campaigns such as Thrive in the City, which attempts to change long-term attitudes towards mental health for those living and working in the City.

Raising awareness of mental health and reducing stigma encourages people to talk freely. It also reduces the fear of coming forward. Especially for BME communities which on average have lower treatment rates and greater stigma, this is vital.[xxxii]

Connections to local communities allows a greater variety of approaches while ensuring a better targeting of services to local needs. Many organisations, such as the Mosaic Community Trust or Sutton Community Farm, are born out of the needs of local residents.

CBOs are deeply rooted within the community and know about local challenges and developments:

> "Universal interventions alone risk increasing existing inequalities and disproportionality. By focusing on local approaches and community groups which are equipped with the necessary knowledge and ability to support more disadvantaged communities better, these groups make a long-term contribution and pioneer an approach to poor mental health in our capital where individuals and communities take the lead."
> - Dan, Thrive LDN

Conclusion

The report underlines the importance of community-led solutions for improving mental health in London. The CBOs featured might be small in size, many of them operating on a shoestring, but their impact is big.

These organisations fill the gaps left by a reduction in public service provision, as well as universal approaches to mental health. They offer an incomparable network of support and stability to people across London, which adapts to individual needs and strengths – independent of ethnicity, age or socio-economic standing.

CBOs not only focus on reducing mental ill health, they also improve people's resilience in the long-term by establishing robust support networks and increasing overall mental wellbeing. They offer targeted and specialised support in an inviting, engaging and empowering environment, specialising in supporting those people who would otherwise not engage with more clinical services.

These organisations concentrate on the strengths and capabilities of each person, rather than focusing on their weaknesses and fears. They abstain from judgment and empower individuals to take the lead in their mental health journey.

CBOs not only improve mental health for individuals, they also change communities. They increase awareness of mental health and reduce stigma. With better acceptance of mental ill health, they help make it easier for people to seek help and receive the support they deserve.

While these organisations make an invaluable contribution to mental health approaches in London, the environment in which they operate is increasingly competitive. Funding has been cut and many groups operate in an environment of instability. This instability is a result of the lack of multi-year or core cost funding. Increasingly, smaller organisations cease to exist.

At the same time, demand for their services is increasing continuously. More and more people turn up to CBOs to access services they do no receive from statutory asylum services.

A widely competitive funding environment and significant increases in demand make this an increasingly challenging time for CBOs. The London Community Foundation will be there to support community-led action and equip CBOs with the means to cope with rising demand.

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