

Better mental health support

Event transcript



Event transcript

Took place on October 30th, 2021

Centre

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Event panel



Stephen Lloyd

Former Member of Parliament

Stephen was the Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Eastbourne. He held a range of front-bench roles, including as spokesperson for Northern Ireland, the DWP, and in the coalition government, as PPS to the Environment Secretary.



Torrin Wilkins

Director of Centre Think Tank

Torrin is the Director and Founder of Centre. He has written articles for multiple publications including a weekly column for Backbench. He has also been interviewed on both the BBC and LBC. Torrin has a Political Studies degree from Aberystwyth University.



Pushkin Defyer

Alumni

Pushkin was our Head of Membership Development. He was previously on the executive of the Young Liberals and is now a member of the Labour Party. He has worked with candidates from multiple parties during election campaigns.



Cllr Will Barber-Taylor

Former Deputy Director

Will was our Deputy Director and now serves as a Councillor. He hosts the Debated Podcast and the Not A Day For Soundbites Podcast. Will was previously the Digital Campaigns & Media Officer for Generation Rent.

About Centre

We are an independent non-profit foundation and cross-party think tank. Our mission is to rebuild the centre ground and to create a more centrist and moderate politics. We support better public services and a strong economy inspired by policies from the Nordic countries.

To achieve these goals, we work with people from across the UK and party politics. This includes engaging with politicians and our networks, which include academia, politics, and law.

Our work includes creating new conversations by hosting events and conducting interviews. We also produce new policy ideas to better inform debate, publish papers, and release articles. We aim to build consensus, shape public opinion, and work with policymakers to change policy.

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Event summary

This discussion focused on the challenges facing mental health support in the UK, including long waiting times, fragmented services, and the persistent stigma surrounding mental illness. Speakers shared personal experiences to highlight how difficult it can be to access help and agreed that both political and systemic reform are needed to create a more supportive environment.

Key topics included integrating mental and physical health care, improving early intervention through schools, and reducing pressures caused by constant testing in education. The conversation also explored how workplaces can better support employees' mental health, particularly through stronger worker rights, clearer access to support, and collaboration between employers and staff.

There was broad agreement that mental health should be treated with the same priority as physical health, supported by a unified and easily accessible system. Participants emphasised the importance of tackling loneliness among older people through community and intergenerational initiatives, and called for greater regulation of social media platforms to reduce online harms. Together, these measures were seen as essential to building a consistent, compassionate, and effective approach to mental well-being across society.

Transcript

Will Barber-Taylor: The first question is for Pushkin. I would like to ask, why did you decide to write the paper in the first place?

Pushkin Defyer: Thank you for the question, Will. I decided to start writing the paper because I, myself, as well as several loved ones around me, experienced mental health issues throughout the pandemic. A lot of personal issues also led to me experiencing difficulties mentally, so I wanted to get some support for myself, and to say it took a long time is an understatement. From the period when I was inquiring about support, to now, when I am getting some support, it has taken about a year. It takes ages. I would say I was fortunate myself because in Oxford, where my education is, we have a talking space, which is great, as you can access that, and I am not sure if it is accessible everywhere. Because when people around me tried to also get helpline support, they were not as fortunate as I was to be able to get such a programme. They had to wait a very long time, and they had to get to a point where the mental health of one or two of my friends got so serious that they were suicidal, and that is when the groups decided to give them support.

It is when they set a very high bar for you to pass. What you are essentially saying is unless you are on the verge of the most serious mental health situation, you do not get any, or you get barely any support and you have to wait ages and even when I received support, I had to still fight for it because when I was referred to the programme, there were still difficulties in getting in contact with them. You have got to take initiative, and if you have mental health issues, it is really difficult to take initiative, to take on certain people, to talk to them, to make sure I get the appointments. I should not have to do that. But I have to continuously phone people back who forgot to phone me, and that is horrifying.

For people with mental health difficulties, the system is nearly impossible to navigate. It feels like it is constantly set against you, and the frustrating thing about mental health is that the politicians know full well the scale of it and the importance of it. They constantly talk about how important it is, and they do little or nothing; whether they are Labour or Conservative, they have done little or nothing to support mental health properly. So that is why I have written the paper. I am really glad that it has received a lot of support, and I am thankful for the help of Centre Think Tank. That is why I have written the paper. It is really important to me, and it has affected a lot of people I care about. So I am glad I have written it.

Will Barber Taylor: One of the things that I got from your response there, Pushkin, was the sense of stigma that quite a lot of people face when going to mental health services and talking about mental health. So, how do you think people can get over that stigma? How can we work to eradicate the stigma related to mental health and the issues that are connected to the mental health service? Pushkin, if you could start with that and then I will go to the rest of the panel.

Pushkin Defyer: I think in terms of stigma, a lot of it comes down to creating a system. So, in my mental health paper, the aim was to create an environment that actively tries to put mental health first. So, whether in the workplace or in schools, we have integrated Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services with the schooling system so that teachers can work more easily to create an environment for their students. I think it is integrating mental health support into our infrastructure as we have it now and that in turn will let people see people around them accessing support, it will be easier to access support, become part and parcel of the conversation because at the end of the day if everyone can access support and there are tailored systems in place for them, over time I hope that it would become part of an average conversation that is my hope that was part of what I want to achieve with the integration into workplaces, schools and care homes and the current infrastructure we have now.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, I think you are right to place that emphasis not just on Parliament and the services themselves, but also related to schools and the education system as well, because that is important. To get mental health education ingrained there as well. I would like to turn now to Izzy, who is the Vice President of Centre Think Tank at Aberystwyth University. Izzy asked the same question. How do you think we can get over the stigma that is related to mental health and make people not feel that there is a stigma in talking about their mental health?

Izzy Teucher: I think the stigma, because it is so ingrained in society as a whole, and it is not a physical thing that you can see, people often do not consider it and think of it as an actual illness. They view it as an excuse. I know I have been told that it is an excuse before in many areas of my life. In terms of trying to get over the stigma, I believe that we should campaign for a lot more awareness around mental health, the issues that it causes, and the issues that we as mentally ill individuals face.

And we can then work with communities and help those individuals who are stuck thinking, I feel like there is something wrong with myself, but I am not entirely sure what it is, because some young individuals might have parents who do not believe it. Whereas working with the communities, we can then be like, "there is something here, let us get rid of all of this stigma."

Will Barber-Taylor: Yeah. And I think you are right to hit upon the points that you did about trying to give people an insight into what is happening within the heads of people who are suffering from mental health issues, quite often, you might not be able to detect just by talking to people. Now, Stephen, I would like to turn to you again with the same question about stigma and the stigmatisation associated with mental health and people needing to seek help. Was that something that you saw at all in Parliament? Was there something that you encountered in terms of the stigmatisation of mental health? Or was there a good support network in Parliament when you were an MP?

Stephen Lloyd: Well, first off, I would like to say I thought that was an outstanding report from Pushkin. I entirely agree with him. The only way forward is the integration of mental health services and the provision of physical health support networks. There are obvious challenges, Pushkin, that you identified like the country council, social services, the NHS and the rest providing provisions, but integration really from school up I think is the only way forward.

In answer to parliament, I am aware there was a mental health provision in Westminster, but how good or bad it is, I do not know. So what I can do is focus on policy issues.

Izzy and Pushkin are right that it is around awareness. What I will just say is, we are literally on a different planet of mental health awareness compared to 20 years ago. My mother was bipolar. I was one of the family members who could manage it and cope with it, and we are so far ahead of what we were years ago, which is a plus. I am only putting that in this context. There is still a great distance to go, which both Izzy and Pushkin have identified. The interesting thing is, the government now believes it. But what Pushkin pointed out quite cogently is that it means they now talk about it all the time. But the delivery is still way behind. Now, it is not much consolation at the moment, but the fact that they get it is a plus because 15 years ago, they just did not get it.

Moving forward to delivery, that is where things get difficult. But I do think that is where the report by Pushkin is the only way forward, and that it becomes normalised because it is integrated from school onwards. Izzy touched on their own personal experiences of the challenges. Yes, they are there, and I think the only way that will change is if it gets pushed down from an awareness perspective in the schools. Push it hard in the schools, and it will become more and more normalised.

Kids are incredible. When you are young, you can adapt so quickly. You really can. And the more that we manage that at a younger age, I think that will have considerable benefit. From my own perspective as an MP, I was also the vice chair of the APPG on mental health for the first few years, and I knew several MPs were very open about their own mental health experiences, and that was very helpful within parliament because human nature is we hear better from people like ourselves. With MPs standing up and talking about their mental health experiences a few years ago and I think that made a real difference.

From a constituency perspective, it is just awful. It varies from area to area, but my team and I did a lot of support for mental health, and had a lot of mental health constituents coming our way. And the provision was sometimes so bad. I did not even want to think about it.

I think Pushkin hit the nail on the head. You have provision, Pushkin, because I could imagine you fought like hell every inch of the damn way. The reality of human beings and mental health is A: some people are not capable of pushing, and that is where they need either MPs, social workers and the NHS or B: even if they are capable of pushing, they just do not know where to go, so it is still a major problem. Stigma, of course, is still there without a single shadow of doubt. I do think it is less simple because I am so bloody old and remember what it was like, but I am not sanguine at all.

I think we need to keep pushing this report. You guys and all of us need to keep pushing for awareness. As for the silver bullets of getting parity between mental health and physical and clinical health, we all need to aim for that. Hopefully, we get there within your lifetime. But that is the way forward.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think it is really important, as you mentioned there, Stephen, to focus on some of the difficulties that people have on a constituency level, on a day-to-day basis, with just being able to access mental health services. Torrin, I would like to turn to you now. How do you think we can get over some of the stigma related to mental health, and how do you think we can improve awareness as well?

Torrin Wilkins: So I think a large amount of what I was gonna say was already covered in terms of ensuring it is embedded into every level of society and of life. But in some ways, I think it is helpful to think about what happens when you have a mental illness compared to a physical illness.

If I were to break my leg, for instance, I know exactly where to go. I can go to Accident and Emergency. I know I will probably get an appointment within the next few hours. I know how it will be treated, and therefore, I am much more certain that I will have a good outcome in that system.

Whereas if I am thinking about mental health, then suddenly it turns into a labyrinth. It is effectively going into the system and hoping that if I push hard enough, as Pushkin said, that I can get something from the system, that I can get treatment, which, from the perspective of a patient, if someone is going into the system who already needs help, is not a particularly nice end outcome.

So I do think that the biggest step forward will be integrating mental health services further into the NHS and ensuring that coverage extends to as many people as possible. Because the big worry is that if we do not do that, mental health is going to hit education standards, it is going to continue to hit schools, and it is going to continue to hit businesses. So genuinely, if we do not improve mental health support, there is a massive price. If we improve services, there are some massive outcomes. And I think one of them will be reducing that stigma, making it normal to get mental health treatment, and making it normal to get treatment quickly.

And I think parity between mental health and physical health almost stands for something a lot bigger, which is that everyone knows they have a body, and everyone knows it can get damaged. But it is bizarre talking about physical health when the same is not true for mental health. At the end of the day, we all have brains, and we can all end up with an injury, just like physical health, but it is not seen that way.

So I think that will be the biggest step: to be able to push that kind of awareness and that kind of system that goes along with it, that says your mental health can be damaged, and it is all of our responsibility to make sure that that system is fixed. Because if you ever need it, and the statistics are quite shocking in the sense that we know a lot of people in their lifetime will need it, whether it is isolation at old age or problems at school and work, then it is all of our responsibility to fix the system.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think you are right to point out the need for everyone to be involved, because as you say, it is something that can affect anybody at any point in their lives. Now, I would like to move on to the next question, which is, what do we think could be the single biggest thing that we could do to improve mental health support within the UK, and why do we think that this one thing would be the single biggest change to mental health support? Pushkin, if you could start.

Pushkin Defyer: Yes, thank you. It is an interesting question, and with no disrespect to you, but I think I am going to answer it by saying I do not think that there is, if I am brutally honest. I think it is a very complicated issue. I think part of the issue is that we have been trying to find one big thing to do, and then we have been trying to just implement that one big thing and focus on that one big thing. I think there is not one big thing you can do because a lot of mental health support relies on a consistent system. So what I want to create is a system that carries you from cradle to grave and looks after you, and you have a healthy and happy first environment. And I want to create a health and happiness-first economy. I want to create this thing throughout life, where you can access support.

And I think there is no single biggest thing because every solution relies on the solution earlier, when you are in education, or a solution later in work, or even later in old age; every solution relies on the other to be as effective as another solution. I think it is all very important, whether it is destigmatising mental health, to make it on par with physical health. It is all interconnected, as Stephen, Torrin, and Izzy have covered, so if we want to help destigmatise, we need to get parity. If we want to solve the issue, we need to destigmatise and have parity.

All these things are very much interconnected and as important as each other, so I did not think there is one big thing.

Will Barber-Taylor: Izzy, what do you think could be the one major thing, if it were to be changed, that could improve mental health support in the UK?

Izzy Teucher: I think I am going to have to go with Pushkin's answer. I am not piggybacking your answer; it covers the whole thing. There is no one thing. There is no one definite answer. There is a system of answers and different layers towards doing it.

Will Barber-Taylor: Stephen, what do you think? Do you think that there is one thing, or do you agree with the other people on the panel that it could not be put down to one simple thing to be changed?

Stephen Lloyd: Both in the sense that both Izzy and Pushkin are right. One of the biggest challenges of mental health is complexity. You can have schizophrenia on one level, to someone having acute depression on the other, and all points in between. It is just absolutely massive. However, if I had a magic wand, what I would have is clarity of provision.

It is just too damn difficult when you have got social services and community care, dealing with one area, you have got the NHS dealing with some aspects and psychiatry dealing with other areas within institutions, within hospitals, it is just too much. Mental health is complicated enough as it is. And so what I would do if I had a magic wand is I would be really brave, and I would have one service that would be sustainable both within the community, because the community is crucial, because you want to try and ensure that people know they can get to someone within the community quickly. I mean, Torrin hit that nail on the head. If I break my leg, I instinctively go to the Accident and Emergency department, but if I have a mental breakdown, I have no clue. My family does not have any idea, and it is just chaos. And by the time you finally get somewhere, more often than not, the concerns are worse than they were before.

So I would have an absolute radical clarity provision under one aegis that works both within the NHS and within community services, so people know instantly where to call or where to go. It is doable. I am convinced of it. I think Pushkin gave the whole framework of how it is doable. The interesting issue, Pushkin, I can tell you as a politician, is that you will get pushback from all the different professional groups who quite like their little silos. Never underestimate the capacity for groups in their silos to push back. I am only flagging that because it is just worth remembering. It is not always just the hopeless politicians or the hopeless this and the hopeless that. It is quite often people who quite like the fact that they are in complete control of their areas.

I would have absolute clarity, a mental health service that is run from the NHS, is run from social services, but it is under one particular framework. I think that would make one hell of a difference.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think you make a clear point there, Stephen. Torrin, what do you think? What kind of thing would you change if you could make any change, or do you think, as Pushkin and Izzy have suggested, that perhaps it could not be one change that could make a massive difference instantly?

Torrin Wilkins: I would have to say, as we have been pushing for quite a long while, this idea of an NHS umbrella, essentially bringing things under the NHS, like social care, like mental health. And I honestly do think that such an idea will get a fair bit of pushback, as Stephen said.

It is easy to forget, considering we were not around, but when the NHS was formed, a lot of doctors and nurses disliked the idea of unifying everything under one service. It was the British Medical Association that was quite against the idea of a single state-run national health service. So honestly, I think it will get pushback, and it will take a brave government to push something like that forward and say this is our priority, to unify under one system. But it is something that we cannot afford not to do. And it will have a financial cost if we do not do it. So I think it will not be the most popular movie ever, but at the same time, it is one of the most necessary steps we need to take.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think you have to make the point there, Torrin, that sometimes good policy and policy that can change lives is not always necessarily that popular. I would like to move on to the next question now, which is related to education, because, of course, a lot of people in the education system at different points struggle with their mental health. So, what can we do to the education system to make it more accommodating for people who have mental health problems and need help, and do it in a way that makes it so that they are not put off from seeking help? Stephen Lloyd, if you could start.

Izzy Teucher: I quite like this question. I think that teaching children from a primary school age about mental health, nothing too dire, but just learning about the basics of it, will then go back to the earlier question, get rid of stigma and also teach the children that it is okay to feel like this and that they can now put labels on it, and they can understand it. Then, as they get further through the education system, they can learn more about it. They can learn to recognise signs in their friends, they can help their friends and themselves as well, and maybe teach the wider community.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely. And I think you are right that often education in the school system is a great way to reach out to the rest of the community and help them be connected with some of the mental health conditions that people in schools and universities are feeling. Pushkin, the same question. What do you think we can do to the education system to make it better for people who need help with their mental health?

Pushkin Defyer: I like the answer from Izzy. A very good answer. And I fully agree. I think that is a very strong point, and the rollout needs to be from a very early age.

I think that plays a key role in what we need. What my paper aimed to do was to create a system that was easy to access and that was implementable in schools. And the point is that nearly every child will go to school, and most of them will go to a state school. And so a big part of mental health in young people will come in a school environment. It will be stress from exams, stress from friend groups or just generally mental health issues that might not have to do with anything, but could be inherent mental health issues.

A lot of it can be dealt with at the school level. And I think what my paper aims to put forward is a very simple system: you are referred to support, and that the support is coordinated with the school, and therefore the school can implement a good support program for every child. And I think the important thing there is that we look at the diverse needs. And I think Stephen Lloyd mentioned this point earlier. There is a varying level; there are different health issues, and there is a lot to it. So there is a diverse need.

If we can create a system where individual plans can easily be implemented in environments like schools, where you will face a lot of pressure and stress and be as a child for a while, if we can have something that is easily implementable for every individual in the school environment and can be easily coordinated with therapists and health support, then I think you have reached a system where you have got a very strong safety net for children.

And if anything, I think it has amazing knock-on effects for education. If you can have a strong mental health system, you can really have healthy and happier schools. And I mean, I do not even need to say, it causes better educational outcomes for everyone. And it is levelling up, by the way. I just want to make that clear. You want to level up to make sure that every region, every constituency, every part of the country, cannot be the case that Oxford has better mental health support than Warrington. It cannot be that London has better mental health support than Manchester. I do not know that for a fact, but it cannot be that every area has different levels of mental health support.

It needs to be a consistent system that works for every individual, not one constituency or another. It needs to work for every single person. And that is how you create an equal starting line for everyone in life. People can achieve when they work hard, and we are not just saying that. This plan will end up in a system where everyone has a good chance at life and happiness, which they deserve.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, I think you are right to focus on the need for consistency across the country, because that is something that you have touched upon there, and I think a lot of people have experienced, where there are varying degrees of support in different parts of the country. Stephen, if I could turn to you now, what do you think we could do to make the education system better for those who are suffering from mental health issues, those who need help with it?

Stephen Lloyd: I mean, I can be short on this because Izzy got it completely spot on with the fact of awareness from a very, very young age. Talking about it. And then Pushkin has just summarised how it can be done. It must be consistent. It must be a clear provision. There must be trained people who know what to do, how to manage it, all the answers in Pushkin. So, very unusual for a politician, I shall keep my answer short: I am with Pushkin and Izzy.

Will Barber-Taylor: Well, there is nothing wrong with a short answer. Torrin, what do you think? How can we make sure that the mental health system is better for people?

Torrin Wilkins: So I will give a slightly longer answer because I think I am going to say something quite different in terms of mental health at schools, and that is, exams. I think a lot of the time, when we are talking about mental health provision in schools. A large chunk of the conversation will be around better provisions for people who have mental health issues, but another big section is preventing mental health issues in the first place, and I think a lot of the work I have done has been looking at education systems and looking more specifically at exams within those systems.

The UK has gone over the top in terms of testing kids. I was looking at what a normal set of exams that a student will do in their life looks like. And at the moment, the government is introducing baseline tests, and they start within the first few weeks of getting into primary school. Following this, they will move on to the SATs, and then, after that, if they are in a selective area, they will move on to the 11 plus. And once they have done that, then they will probably end up doing GCSEs, A levels or BTECs, depending on what they go for, and then perhaps a degree at the end of it.

And so I think what we are starting to see is an overuse of testing. And in an educational sense, it is not good that we end up spending so much time doing testing. But the other impact of it is that when you are doing what is known as high-stakes tests, where you sit at the end of the year and you get two exams that decide exactly how you have done for an entire year of school, it is a huge level of pressure. And I remember that from my own time doing A levels and GCSEs: it is a lot of pressure for students.

Part of it will be getting rid of some of those tests. The 11 plus, for instance, the majority of people do not pass that test. When I was on the steering group of Comprehensive Future you had people with the same experience of "Well, I failed the test. I felt like a failure." and that honestly was a difficult thing to hear, but I do think it has a fundamental impact on what tests can do, and the fact that we do need to get rid of the baseline tests and SATs and the 11 plus and probably streamline GCSEs.

Again, it is another thing that will come with pushback. Certainly, on the 11 plus, we have found that it will come with pushback. Some of the things that are worth doing will. And I honestly think it will have not only educational benefits, but also benefits to students and their mental health.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely. And I think you are right to make the point relating to testing because it is something that quite clearly does have a very detrimental effect, particularly on school-aged children, when they are forced to regularly hit a particular standard and do test after test after test and learn to test. And it is not particularly helpful, I think we can all agree.

I would like to turn now to the next question, which is on businesses. Businesses obviously have to make a profit because if they do not make a profit, then they will not be able to continue to function. But they also need to have proper facilities and proper help for those people who are working in the businesses who may have mental health issues or may be suffering in some way or another. So, how can we make sure that businesses, in the private sector, are doing all they can to ensure that there are good mental health provisions for people who are working in them? Pushkin, if you could start.

Pushkin Defyer: It is a difficult one because I think that a lot of people are in that place, and there is a lot that can be done. I think the difficulty there is, unlike schools, for instance, if we touch on the earlier topic, private workplaces are their own place; they are all individual areas we cannot necessarily coordinate.

So I think what we aimed to do was to create a system where it did not cost small businesses and it did not put them any further behind bigger businesses, with subsidised support. We made sure that people who are contracted by businesses are under their plan. So there are a lot of people who can be forgotten in these plans, and we want to make sure they are involved.

But for the bulk of workers who are directly employed by businesses, I think it is important that we create a framework that every business can work with.

The important thing here is that we want to implement the idea of collective bargaining, where workers and businesses, the people who know the most about their environment, can discuss legally binding mental health plans and general rights and improve the rights of workers.

And I think mental health is synonymous with other issues. I think mental health is synonymous with the rights of workers. I think we need to strengthen the rights of workers. And I think part of that comes from companies talking, and I understand that there might be some pushback with people saying, "Oh, this is a left-wing idea, and this is crazy." What is next? Workers run their cooperatives."

But I do not think it is that bad. I do not think it is that left-wing of an idea. I think businesses and company boards, and workers have a lot more in common than they have differences: that they want to be productive, and they want to be in a good environment and in turn, the company boards want them to be productive. The company boards want them to work well. And they both have common interests.

So, an important policy for me in the business side of things is collective bargaining. Because I think it is key that workers and company boards work together for the betterment of the business. And I think there has never been enough emphasis placed on the fact that the productivity crisis is an issue here. And I think a lot of it comes down to the fact that workers need to be heard on boards. They have it in other countries, and it works perfectly fine.

I think workers need to be heard. And I think companies will find that they have a lot more in common with their workers. If you can create that unity between worker and company, then I think you have got stronger worker rights, you have got a happier worker base, but we are strengthening mental health rights without a big government backing and trying to clumsily tell businesses what to do.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think you are right to focus on individuality again there, because, of course, every individual is different, and the circumstances in which they will find themselves will be different as well. Izzy, the same question. What do you think businesses can do to help people who may be suffering from mental health issues?

Izzy Teucher: I think creating that rapport and that awareness between the employer and the employee, no matter the size of the business, is a very crucial thing. I am going to touch on personal experiences because I suffer from depression. I have gone to work, and I have had bosses who get so defensive because they do not quite understand why I still have to go to work and why I am still there. But then, sitting down with my employer and being like, "Look, this is the ins and outs. I am just having an off day. I am still okay to work," they began to understand and recognise when I was a little bit off and was having a bit of a difficult time. So I think creating that rapport is a very, very crucial thing in business.

Will Barber-Taylor: I think you are entirely right, Izzy, to focus on sometimes the personal rapport that is needed between the employer and the employee to fully understand the mental health problems that are perhaps going on. Stephen, on this point, what do you think businesses can do to help people who may need support?

Stephen Lloyd: Two things. Remember, there are corporates and there are small and medium-sized enterprises, and they are chalk and cheese. So if you are BP or Lloyds Bank or whatever, you are going to have a huge HR department. And then if you are the local builder down the road with three staff, it is a completely different situation. It is important for any policymakers, when they are thinking in terms of how to get good mental health support and provision into business, never to confuse the fact that they are one great big mash, because it is just so different. It is unbelievable.

The second thing is actually what I think the paper from Pushkin is about, and what we have been talking about this morning is the more awareness there is, not just of mental health, but about where to go when there is a problem. That is the solution. If you are a small business, you are juggling 50 different balls, 24/7. What you need is simplicity. And I also actually think that applies to corporations. So the more we get the system in place, and I go back to this one integrated service, frankly, I think we should go bang for buck for this. The more we get it in place, so people understand, "Okay, my member of staff, I have got a little bit of awareness of mental health, they are talking to me, he or she is having an issue, I understand where I need to go." It is very simple: pick the phone up. Then you can make some real progress.

What you cannot do, because it just will not work, is rely on small businesses to be wholly proactive. Because frankly, most of them, 24/7, are hanging on by a thread. And even if they are not, the owner is working 24 hours a day, because you tend to do that when you are an SME. So you have got to make it simple for them.

The awareness part, which again is in the paper by Pushkin, and Izzy has spoken about it, from primary school onwards, will just normalise it. I do believe we are making progress in that situation, simply because I am old enough, and I know what it was like years ago. But to sort it for businesses, make it straightforward for them so they know where to call.

Then on the corporate side, I think having worker representation on board, which is not just about mental health, it is about a whole range of things, the Telegraph and Mail would scream blue murder, but it seems to have worked in Germany pretty well. And I would imagine a few other countries as well. So I think that is also a good idea and would help.

The main thing is having one unified provision, one unified service, awareness, and making it easier for businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to know who to call for help.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, I think you made some very valuable comparisons between the situation in Britain and what is often seen in parts of Europe. Torrin, if I can turn to you now, what do you think businesses can do to help people who may need help with their mental health?

Torrin Wilkins: In part, it is about helping those smaller businesses. I saw when I was working on the excluded issue, where people had not been able to access government financial support during the pandemic, that a lot of people found it very difficult not only to access support, but also just to get listened to. It is quite easy to get listened to if you are a business with thousands of employees. When you have twenty employees or three employees or one hundred employees, it is much more difficult to get your voice heard at the table and to get the government to listen to you.

Which is why I am very happy that this includes not only measures for those larger businesses that will benefit an enormous amount from tackling mental health issues, but also their productivity will benefit, fewer sick days, so there are a lot of benefits for those businesses in terms of tackling mental health problems. But I think there are other things that we can do alongside that to support people who are struggling within their businesses.

We have put in what I suppose you could almost describe as the last line of defence with a Guaranteed Minimum Income, which is effectively this idea that if you are below the poverty line, then it is getting the government to step in and pay you in a way that is a much more simplistic version than Universal Credit. So there are ideas of that kind which simplify the existing benefit system, which even the Adam Smith Institute, which is quite a right-wing organisation, has endorsed as something that they would support and has endorsed as something that would save money because of the reduction in bureaucracy.

So there is a lot we can do, not just within workplaces but also outside of them, that will support employees whether they need to leave their workplace or, on the other hand, to ensure that they can stay in that workplace, whether they are a small business or a big business, effectively allowing all of them to have better mental health overall.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely. I think you have raised some really important points there, Torrin. I would like to turn to our last question. Loneliness is something that affects a great many people in the UK, and it particularly affects the elderly and can damage their mental health, so what can we do to make loneliness, particularly the loneliness felt by elderly people, something that does not impact their mental health as much, or reduce it entirely? Izzy, if you could start with this one.

Izzy Teucher: Very good question. I believe it has been taken into consideration a lot more within the last five years, but bringing the community together, I believe, is going to be a very big thing to assist with the loneliness of the elderly. A lot of them will be placed in care homes, or they might not have family around them. I know personally, my family is very scattered around the UK, so it is quite difficult to go and see each other.

But I think having schoolchildren come in on a weekend or during half terms, and looking after and spending time with the elderly. There was a discussion the other day where you would have primary school children and nursery-aged children coming into the care homes and running around, and encouraging the elderly to get up and become more lively. Giving them someone to look after, but at the same time, someone to enjoy watching and teaching the things they know. Being able to just bring a lot more smiles to the community and coming all together to assist each other as one cohesive unit is very important.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think that issue that you pointed out, of a bridging of the age gap, is very important, is it not? Pushkin, the same question: what do you think can be done to help people who are suffering from loneliness, particularly the elderly, to ensure that their mental health is not damaged?

Pushkin Defyer: No, of course, it is a very prevalent issue. A lot of my research at that point in the paper,

I looked at Mind UK a lot. They have some very good research on this, and I recommend people go and check out what they have to say. I read a report where they broke it into different categories, including finance, accessibility, and transport. All of these different issues need to be addressed.

So, when it comes to finance, we have the guaranteed top-up scheme, which is again similar to the guaranteed minimum income. Finance-induced stress does have a big effect on mental health, and I think that is important. We want to introduce better infrastructure for Wi-Fi and technologies so older people can phone loved ones at a distance, because I think that is important.

I think there is a lot we can do. I could put loads of solutions here, because every issue is concerning this. If you improve the general infrastructure, transport, trains and buses, it would help people.

I think a really big solution is making social care accessible. We want to create a free-at-the-point-of-use, nationalised social care system. We would do that with a ring-fenced fund from income tax for those who are younger, and for those who have not been around long enough to pay into it, we would fund it immediately with some tax increases on dividends and capital gains to place them at the same level as income tax.

But creating free-at-the-point-of-use social care would mean that intergenerational care, as Stephen Lloyd pointed out, and I know Torrin loves to talk on this, would create a proper infrastructure where people could have faith that their grandparents, their friends, and elderly people in their lives could get the care they deserve. After so many years of hard work, after contributing to our country, our culture, and our economy, people deserve to be protected in old age.

We want to create a system, a social care system that is the envy of the world. And I think we really can do that. We need to be bold. We need to nationalise it. We need to make it free at the point of use. That would go a long way in creating accessible infrastructure that elderly people can check into, so they are not lonely, so they get support, and so we can build those community links within those care homes.

And it is a lot cheaper than doing nothing. Mental health deterioration leads to physical ailments and other mental health problems. It costs tens of billions to the economy every year, due to deteriorating mental and physical health among old-age pensioners. So I think it is vital that we deal with mental health. At every level of society. We deal with it at the root, and a big part of that is nationalised, free-at-the-point-of-use, intergenerational social care.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think also the point that you made relating to infrastructure is really important as well, because it is something that not only helps with mental health issues, but a lot of other problems that we face in Britain at the moment. Stephen, if I could turn to you, what do you think we can and should be doing to deal with mental health conditions that are related to loneliness, particularly among elderly people?

Stephen Lloyd: Again, two things. There is “older” and there is “elderly.” So I am going to say “older” is 65–70+, and “elderly” is over 80, just as a distinction, because there are very definite differences. A lot of people now in their late 60s and 70s are much fitter than their parents were, by a huge margin. In my day, if you got to 70, 72, 73, you were an old man. Nowadays, people of 75 are getting on cruises and racing cars. The world has changed.

What has not changed, and this is the flip side, is that families have become more atomised. In the old days, you had a much more nuclear family. The reality is that the nuclear family looked after their grandparents, including grandma and granddad. There was that nucleus. It had downsides, sure, but the upside was that it obviated loneliness.

In Eastbourne, which by the way, has not as many old people as the stereotype suggests, out of 100,000 people, about 25,000 are over 65 or 75. That is quite high at 25%.

I did some work with a guy whose wife sadly died of dementia. He was going through a sad time, first when she was ill and then again when she died. He was very lonely. He is 90 years old. But he got off his backside a few years ago and started a charity called Just Friends for Eastbourne.

And what I can tell you is, within about 18 months, they had 500 members. These are people from, let us say, 68 to 85. What was interesting was that, as a Member of Parliament, I supported it, and I went along to visit, and what was so interesting was that these were normal, ordinary people who were older and just lonely as sin. And Just Friends transformed their lives. That brought home to me just how pernicious loneliness is, how much of a problem it is, and, relatively speaking, how fixable it is.

So, back to the idea from Izzy of the schools making arrangements with care homes, why not? If you make that part of the single national service, schools could be encouraged to contact care homes. It is doable. And it would make a hell of a difference. It might be a bit frightening for the kids at first, six, eight, nine years old, meeting an 85-year-old man or woman they are not used to. But kids are brilliant. You chuck them in the deep end, and they adapt within 24 hours.

But what I would do is put it under the aegis of this service we have all been talking about. It would raise awareness in schools. And then, with the Just Friends thing, I think the voluntary sector has a huge role to play here. Because loneliness is a weird emotion. First of all, it is awful. Secondly, it is pernicious. Thirdly, it is embarrassing. A 68-year-old man or woman, successful life, family gone, for them to admit they are lonely? It is embarrassing and humiliating.

And that is why the voluntary sector is key. Because this national service can facilitate, but I do not think it can fix loneliness directly. Because these people will not always admit to it. And they are not always at the point of a full mental health breakdown; they are just lonely. And there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, in this country in that category. It links younger and older generations, and what I saw with Just Friends was extraordinary.

The care home idea from Izzy? Brilliant. But for the rest, I think the voluntary sector needs to step up. The national service can provide the infrastructure and templates, but this will need community groups. Age UK, Age Concern, they already do visiting friends, but mostly for care homes. We need to go wider.

That cohort who have left work, kids left home, aged 65–75, and there are millions out there. And I believe if we do not assist them now, they will deteriorate into more serious mental health problems. We need to intervene before that happens. And we need to do it unashamedly. Because if there is one thing I have learned, the embarrassment of loneliness is very real.

Will Barber–Taylor: I think you made some excellent points there, Stephen, and I think, particularly focusing on the issue of embarrassment and the voluntary sector, like Just Friends, is something we have to keep in mind with this particular issue. Turning to you now, Torrin, what do you think we can do to tackle the loneliness problem that affects many elderly people and many people over a certain age?

Torrin Wilkins: I think it comes in two parts. One is, I would say, intergenerational care, which, as Pushkin said, I could go on all day about. I think the idea behind that is fantastic in terms of bringing together young people and people in care homes. And that not only improves the mental health and the physical health of the older people, but it also helps those younger people who are then becoming not only more active, but they are also learning from those older people in those settings. It also brings in the mums and the dads. That starts to repair some of the community that I think during this pandemic has been lost from having to isolation. Because as much as a lot of communities have come together during the pandemic, being socially isolated, being locked away has made it more difficult, especially for a lot of elderly people who do not have either access or the ability to use technology.

I think the other thing which will help a lot of those outside of those age ranges, as Stephen said, is that the people who are not in care homes but are younger than that. I think that community hubs will be an enormous thing to push forward. Because I have one down the road from me, I am in Hertfordshire, but just on the border of Cambridgeshire. Just over the border in Cambridge, there is a fantastic community hub.

From a very young age, I used to go there, and that had lots of activities on. And it was a fantastic place in terms of bringing the community together in a way that was not about saying, "You are lonely or you must have a mental health problem." It was a very open space where anyone could go and meet up and chat, even if it was just for a coffee or to do activities with other people. And those kinds of things I think are fantastic, not just for loneliness in older people, but also in younger people as well and getting people involved in community after the pandemic.

Will Barber-Taylor: Absolutely, and I think it is really important, as you say, to make the comparison between how it is dealt with in particular areas and other areas. We are now going to move on to my final question before we go to the Question and Answer section.

This is something that Torrin has specifically requested, so I will be asking him the question first. It is Halloween tomorrow. So, for the panel, if you were invited to a Halloween party and you had to go to the Halloween party as a political figure from the past hundred years, who would you go as? Torrin, as it was you who requested it, could you respond first?

Torrin Wilkins: I have put this on myself. Before I got my haircut, my nickname was Margaret Thatcher because it started to grow long and curly. So I would probably end up coming as Margaret Thatcher, considering my now ex-hair style. It looks much better. The barber did an amazing job of removing quite a lot of hair, and we have been going to them for years. So it is quite useful that they know how to cut it. It was extremely long hair. I would have grown my hair out again if I could, or not get the haircut and go as Margaret Thatcher.

Will Barber-Taylor: Pushkin, who would you go as?

Pushkin Defyer: Goodness. Can you come back to me? Would that be OK?

Will Barber-Taylor: You can defer for the moment. I mean, it is all the fault of Torrin, so you can blame him. I was not going to ask any questions like this, but he insisted. Stephen, if you had to go to a Halloween party as a political figure from the last 100 years, who would you go as?

Stephen Lloyd: That is such a random question from Torrin, absolutely random. First of all, my generation did not know much about Halloween. By the way, Torrin, you look like a young Tony Blair. I have to tell you, you look less like Margaret Thatcher and more like a young Tony Blair.

Torrin Wilkins: Can I just say I agree with that? I have been called that in the past.

Pushkin Defyer: I fully agree with that.

Stephen Lloyd: Well, I do not know about a Halloween thing, but if I had to be a politician, I mean, that is such a random question, I have never thought of it, but a politician that I admired in my youth, he would turn in his grave over Corbyn, would be Anthony Crosland. They were a really series of heavyweight Labour thinkers that came out of Second World War, I mean major politicians, one of them was Anthony Crosland, for those of really into politics will know that he was quite a big figure for Labour in many years, but anyway I suppose that goes to him simply because it is such a random question and I rated him so highly and it would be good for younger people to remember some of the quite significant Labour figures of the past compared to perhaps their less significant members today.

Will Barber-Taylor: How about you, Izzy Teucher?

Izzy Teucher: I am not sure. This one is difficult. I think Torrin kind of took my answer for Margaret Thatcher. Not because I look like her, but I do not agree with a lot of her standpoints, but I do admire how headstrong she was and how persistent she was with her campaigns. I like to think that I am also very headstrong and persistent, so I think that would be my answer.

Will Barber-Taylor: Back to you, Pushkin, or would you like to defer again?

Pushkin Defyer: There is no right answer, I feel. Someone could pick it apart. Let me get a little more into modern politicians. I quite like Lisa Nandy. I would have liked her to have been elected leader of the Labour Party. I have not kept an eye on her recently, but I quite liked her leadership campaign, and I am quite used to dressing up as a woman in school plays. Throughout the entirety of my life, every school play I have been in, I do not know if it is like the comedy of the fact that I am six six-foot, relatively broad-shouldered bloke, but I have always been cast as a woman, and I quite like the makeup as well. So I think I would be more than comfortable going as a woman. So I think I would perhaps take Lisa and Andy Burnham. I quite like them both.

Will Barber-Taylor: Two as Margaret Thatcher, Lisa, Andy Burnham and Anthony Crosland. Well, that is certainly an interesting way to end my questions. We are to go over to the Question and Answer section now. Oh, Matthew has already got a question. So I will hand it over to you.

Mathew: Thank you. First of all, just to answer that last question, if I might, considering it is Halloween and there was, it was always said that there was something of the night about Michael Howard. I would go as Count Dracula, aka Michael Howard.

The serious question I would like to ask is what can be done, what more can be done by social media companies to better ensure that they are not perpetrators of people feeling bad about themselves and poor mental health. I am thinking of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The reason that I ask this is that I often think that there are at least two things that social media companies do wrong in this regard. They enable people to promote, especially on things like Instagram, a kind of perfect life, look at us having our perfect, wonderful holidays, and everything is perfect, and you do not get to see that life is not always like that. Life can sometimes be nice, life can sometimes even be glamorous, but a lot of the time it is not, it is difficult and it is painful and all the rest of it.

I am all for free speech so far as it goes, but I also think there is a line where social media companies often allow the most vile of things to be said, and there seems to be little action. And I even saw a quote from Nick Clegg, formerly of the Liberal Democrats, now of Meta. Where he said, "Oh, well, we just reflect society", as if that was kind of an answer to anything being said, because we are just reflecting society. So my question is, what more should social media companies be doing? Thanks.

Torrin Wilkins: From my own experience, because my own experience is in part running our social media. And you start to learn about the algorithms behind social media and how if you post something just at the right level between being completely obnoxious and something no one would agree with, and with something that is a positive message, if you post something in the middle that is just enough to get discussed about, you will find the number of likes that that individual post gets is enormous.

This can happen in multiple ways. It can be very, very serious. It can be on the level of hate speech. Or you can find, as I did one morning waking up, that a map of what a federal UK could look like, which I made for Twitter, ended up being viewed more than 50,000 times. And I was thinking, "How is this possible given what you put on social media?" And the reason is that generating some kind of controversy reflects well in algorithms and is picked up by social media companies. It is that engagement is getting comments and it is getting likes, which is why posts will be pushed up that should not necessarily be there. And in that sense, it helps those people who are more on the extreme sides of politics than those people who are in the centre ground.

I think in part it is about regulation, because we have not got there with social media companies yet. There have been a huge number of ideas put forward about how we can regulate social media companies properly. Do we give people more agency over the data that they are giving to these social media companies? In terms of social media, I think it is about starting to regulate, as we have not done a good enough job of ensuring they are tackling hate speech, but also the basic issues where social media platforms promote posts which create controversy. We give an outsized voice to those who create controversy rather than a fairer platform if we aim to reflect society.

Will Barber-Taylor: How about you, Stephen?

Stephen Lloyd: Thank you, Matthew. That is an important question, and it is entirely relevant today. I think two things will improve it. One, I think we need to remove anonymity from Twitter. But, and there is a big but here, and it must be done technically, there must be a way that you can retain anonymity in countries where, if you do not retain anonymity, you will be put behind bars.

I do believe that anonymity allows some folks, sadly, the freedom to be even more vile than they would be without anonymity. So I think it is something to look at. I also agree with Torrin on regulation. As a small (L) liberal, I am with you. I do not head towards regulation first off, but this is just getting out of hand. I mean, particularly, I see with so many youngsters and young women with Instagram and what have you, and the level of bullying is just unbelievable. Sad to say, where Nick Clegg is right is that social media, which was seen as a great leveller, has allowed us as humans to pander to some of our basic motives in the most appalling way. It has been quite shattering for me to observe the last 20 years. For a lot of ordinary people, this is wicked beyond extremes. The answer is to remove anonymity in other areas that are under dictatorships. I think Congress is getting ready to look at this in the same way as they did with Standard Oil.

Pushkin Defyer: I agree with Stephen. The question from Matthew is very good indeed. Personally, my view on Nick Clegg is that he sold himself out to Meta. And I am very disappointed in what he has done. And I think it is a worrying thing about sites like Meta. And take the fact that loads of people use TikTok, it is a direct result of the algorithm just feeding into what you want to see. And it boxes you into this corner, where it just reinforces everything you want to believe. It traps you in this constant algorithm of predicting what you want to see.

Like Torrin said, it is the controversial and negative things which get attention. Companies do not have a positive incentive to put nice things out there. To improve mental health, which would cost them money, even if a very small proportion of their income. Unfortunately, there are plenty of harms from social media companies, and we need to regulate companies.

Will Barber-Taylor: I will now move on to a question from Nicola.

Nicola: First of all, I think that one of the problems with dealing with online abuse and the nature of social media being so adversarial is that it is one of the things that drives their profit. I know, a lot of people who will only use social media, Twitter, for example, to vent their spleen about politics in the UK or the situation in the UK, and I think it will have to be regulated. There is no way these platforms are ever going to make any changes otherwise.

The thing with anonymity, I have been on the receiving end of a lot of abuse, to the level of the police being involved. I have an issue with anonymity in the sense that if people are committing crimes, harassment, stalking and misdeeds, they can be tracked, they can be found. The issue at the moment with Twitter is that they will only work with the UK police if it is a safeguarding issue. I, as an adult, do not count as a safeguarding issue, and that needs to be reformed.

I do have an issue with saying that only countries need anonymity. The issue is that a lot of people who live in the UK also need to be anonymous on social media for a variety of reasons. The public face should be anonymous, but the platform should be able to see who you are and release it to the authorities if needed. Otherwise, you exclude a large number of people who need to be anonymous on social media.

Will Barber-Taylor: I would like to thank our panel, Izzy, Torrin, Pushkin and Stephen, for being at this event, for discussing the paper by Pushkin and discussing it in great depth and detail. I would like to thank the audience for coming along. It has been a very interesting discussion, and I hope a lot of people have got things out of it.

We are going to be announcing some more events in due course. So make sure to check them out when they are going to be on and keep looking at our website and the Twitter page. A recording of this event will be up on our website. So, thank you once again to everyone for coming.

I hope you have a great rest of the day, and you come to the next event.

Note: This event has been edited for grammar, clarity, and flow. The original recording is the final and definitive version.

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