



All-Party Parliamentary Group on HIV/AIDS  
House of Commons  
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The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street London  
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Dear Secretary of State

We welcome your warm words at the despatch box during the adjournment debate on the HIV Commission report in December and that you hope to publish the HIV action plan this summer.

Our Mental Health enquiry that we published last year, looked at the impact of having stigmatised conditions - mental health and HIV. We know that stigma is bad for mental health, but one of the key points raised by this report is that stigma is preventing people from accessing the treatment and care that they need.

While the real “threat” of HIV may have disappeared the “perceived” threat continues to exist through stigmatising, outdated attitudes which have a hugely detrimental impact on the effectiveness of treatment and are contributing to the increase in late diagnosis.

People with HIV are twice as likely to experience mental health issues compared to the general population. In the latest Positive Voices report, 50% of people with HIV reported feelings of depression or anxiety on any given day (compared to 24% of the general population).

COVID-19 and HIV share a number of shared risk factors, creating multiple layers of risk to mental health for people living with HIV. Without sufficient mental health support for people with HIV, adherence rates will deteriorate, and infections will increase.

The experience of the Covid pandemic has brought home to the general public something which people who have direct or indirect experience of HIV have long known. COVID-19 is putting significant strain on mental health services which have had to adapt to current restrictions on face-to-face contact. This is having a particularly detrimental impact on people living with HIV who are, in many cases, already suffering from social isolation due to stigma.

Addressing mental health needs is crucial to the HIV response and our success in reaching the 2030 target of zero new infections. We would welcome an update on what progress has been made since the publication of our report in implementing any of the recommendations, such as:

1. A comprehensive strategy for reducing HIV stigma in the UK is urgently needed. The response to stigma in the UK significantly lags behind the gains we have made in prevention, testing and treatment. As a first step, there should be an overarching campaign to reduce stigma across the NHS.
2. "Perceived stigma" is a mental health issue which requires different interventions. People with HIV who are afraid to access mainstream services because of perceived stigma need to be able access HIV specific services or health professionals who are trained in HIV stigma and its impact on mental health. The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) need to ensure there is a clear commissioning pathway or service specification to make this possible.
3. Sustainable Transformation Partnerships (STPs) should be assessing how improvements on the integration between physical and mental health services can be made.
4. NHS England should assess the HIV competency of all Increased Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) services. This could form part of NHS England's ongoing work to improve IAPT services for people with long-term conditions.
5. Increased implementation of the BHIVA Standards of Care and Monitoring Guidelines are needed across HIV services in the UK, ensuring that more HIV services are assessing mental health needs amongst patients, ensuring that all HIV services have clear referral pathways into mental health care, and that more HIV services have a designated clinical lead for psychological support.

It is important that you commit that the HIV action plan will include action on mental health support for people living with HIV.

We look forward to working with you to better the lives of those people living with HIV and to end new transmissions of HIV by 2030.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely

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Baroness Masham – Vice Chair All-Party Parliamentary Group on HIV/AIDS  
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