

25th Advice Forum Report

'Mental Health Services in Reading'

November 5, 2025

Introduction

1 Richard Harrison, the RAN Chair began by welcoming attendees to the Forum, and the three speakers:

- Callum Flynn from Compass Recovery College
- Zahra Akhtar and Nagina Batool from Together for Mental Wellbeing

Presentations

A Compass Recovery College

2 Callum Flynn began by briefly describing his own lived experience which had led him to come and work at the College. He explained that the College, which was run by Reading Borough Council, aimed to create a safe space for those struggling with mental health and wellbeing, by bringing together lived experience and clinical expertise to create an informed and experienced team. It ran three key activities;

- Mental health workshops
- Wellbeing workshops
- Drop-in sessions

3 The mental health workshops were designed to help the participants understand their mental health challenges and teach them the skills they needed to manage these challenges effectively. The college offered a range of different workshops such as 'Managing Anxiety' or 'Domestic Abuse and Mental Health'. There was also a number of different Wellbeing workshops such as 'Wellbeing for Carers' or 'Journalling', all designed to help participants explore their emotions and develop coping skills. Some workshops were held in person, others were online, but workshop participants had to register in advance, and for several of the workshops there was a waiting list. So far this year Compass had held over 100 workshops with over 500 participants.

4 Drop-in sessions, by contrast, did not require preregistration and there were no waiting lists. They were held online or in person every day from Monday to Friday and were designed to help participants build social connections, share experiences and feel supported. He concluded his presentation with two case studies - Chloe, who was spiralling through successive hospital admissions and Alastair who had suffered mental distress watching his child struggling with mental illness. The slides he used, which describe the workshops and drop-in sessions in more detail, are attached with this report.

B Together for Mental Wellbeing

5 Zahra Akhtar explained that Together for Mental Wellbeing offered two different programmes:

- Breathing Space
- A Men's Mental Health service

6 She explained that 'Breathing Space' provided a welcoming and safe space outside normal working hours for anyone aged 18 and over who was experiencing mental distress or a mental health crisis. It offered in person, telephone or online appointments, with the

opportunity to talk to someone, work on things like coping skills or simply relax and listen to music. Participants could refer themselves or be referred by a professional. However, there were several things that Breathing Space couldn't provide - such as regular ongoing support or a section 136 Place of Safety - and it could not accommodate people who were disruptive or aggressive, intoxicated with alcohol or drugs, or anyone posing an immediate risk to themselves or others.

7 Her colleague, Nagina Batool, then outlined the new men's mental health service that they were offering. This was open to men aged 18 and over who were living in Reading or registered with a Reading GP, and offered awareness sessions, weekly 1 - 1 support, fortnightly drop-ins and group workshops. It aimed to reach men in locations they used regularly, such as gyms or barber shops, and to create safe spaces where men could talk about their mental wellbeing, build friendships and support each other. The slides she and Zahra used, which set out the two programmes in more detail, are attached with this report.

Discussion Groups

8 The discussion groups were asked to consider two questions:

- How far do these services meet the needs of your service users?
- What else would you like these services to offer?

9 The key points emerging from the discussion groups, which were reported in the closing plenary session, were as follows:

- These are good services, meeting a widespread need. They are easy to access and work together to ensure they complement each other, not duplicate or overlap. And both are open to developing new services.
- But:
 - Are people generally aware of them and what they offer, and if not - how do people find out about them? Could they be better promoted? In particular, is the term 'Recovery College' a sufficiently helpful indication of the services it offers?
 - Could some services be extended - for example, by adding more drop-ins or evening sessions?
 - These are specific, focused services, not a Reading-wide comprehensive mental health provision. The groups highlighted, in particular, a lack of provision for
 - under 18 year olds - even though Starting Point provides mentoring and No5 provides counselling and mental health support to 11 - 25 year olds. Helping young people, particularly boys, from primary school age onwards to develop positive attitudes to their mental wellbeing is really important
 - people in crisis or with complex needs whose mental health needs are more acute, but not sufficiently acute that they can be hospitalised, either voluntarily or through being sectioned
 - people with poor literacy skills, who need adult literacy support to boost their self-esteem and resilience
 - families
- The cut-off points in some services at 18 or 25 can create major problems for some service users if it is not clear where they can go next
- Community Hubs can be valuable, friendly local resources that can help people with mental health problems, but are they available everywhere in Reading?

- Case studies are particularly helpful in showing how services actually operate, so making relevant referrals easier.
- There is a real need for a clear 'map' of the full range of mental health services and how they operate, to help RAN members make appropriate referrals and identify the right pathways for their service users.

Conclusion

10 Richard Harrison brought the Forum to a close by thanking the speakers for their excellent contributions, and invited those attending to stay and network.

Richard Harrison December 2025